Expanding the Aims of Public Rhetoric and Writing Pedagogy: Writing Letters to Editors

This article outlines a three-part pedagogy capable of responding to the risks, rewards, and headaches associated with public rhetoric and writing. To demonstrate the purchase of this pedagogy, I revisit one of the oldest and most misunderstood public rhetoric and writing assignments: the letter-to-the-editor assignment.

The letter to the editor opened with the line “Public displays of affection are a regular occurrence on any college campus and Virginia Tech is no exception” (Poole). It proceeded to describe what its writer, Ethan Poole, labeled a “relatively accepted” scene on college campuses: “Couples [. . .] walking together, holding hands and even [sharing] a smooch here and there.” Quickly, though, Poole problematized the scene, arguing that “when a gay or lesbian couple displays such affection, they only receive hateful stares and ridicule.” For support, Poole offered experiential evidence, explaining that “[j]ust the other day

Involving students in "public writing" is fraught with headaches of all sorts.
—Christian R. Weisser, Moving beyond Academic Discourse

This is headachy, heart-pounding work.
—Nancy Welch, Living Room

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as my boyfriend and I were leaving a dining hall, a guy looked at us and said ‘faggots’ as he passed by.” No two people, the letter held, should be ridiculed or harassed for displaying affection toward one another. Moreover, the letter called upon those of us on college campuses to practice acceptance and, by doing so, set an example for the rest of society.

This particular letter to the editor was familiar to me. Its writer, Ethan Poole, was a student in my fall 2010 Introduction to College Composition course, and Ethan’s letter was written as a course assignment that was part of a unit in public rhetoric. I had read this letter in its draft form and in its final state. Now I was reading it in the “Opinions” section of our campus newspaper, the Collegiate Times. My iteration of the assignment required students to submit their letters for publication. Accordingly, Ethan had “put in [his] oar” (Burke 110) and entered into a conversation that had been ongoing in the newspaper for well over a month. The conversation was about student conduct and human rights, and it had been initiated by coverage of the news story dubbed the “Rutgers Webcam Spying Case.” The question posed by the Rutgers case, at least as it appeared in the pages of the Collegiate Times, was fundamentally a question of conduct: How do we, as members of a society, conduct ourselves in relation to one another? A number of Collegiate Times writers argued that the Rutgers case should teach us to conduct ourselves better by exercising more foresight, by practicing more empathy, and by showing more compassion. Ethan’s letter followed in this vein in that it caught and carried on “the tenor of the argument” (Burke 110) that was threaded through the past issues of the Collegiate Times by calling for increased acceptance.

As I read Ethan’s published letter, the question of conduct that Ethan raised became, for me, a question about the way I conducted the public rhetoric unit in my course and, by extension, the conduct of public writing pedagogies in writing courses across the nation. Writing courses, as Elizabeth Ervin notes, maintain a “fraught relationship” with public rhetoric (“Composition” 48). For Ervin, it is the teacher of public rhetoric and writing who must “actively accompany [students] in the transition from virtual-public discourse to real-public discourse, from class participation to civic participation” (“Encouraging” 389). The accompaniment to which Ervin refers is indeed a form of pedagogical conduct, but it is conduct loaded with unanticipated effects—rewards as well as risks. In Ethan’s case, the fact that his letter was published in a newspaper that maintains a readership of over twenty-six thousand individuals came with the rewarding possibility that his writing could actually effect some of the change for which he was advocating, perhaps easing what he referred to
as the “PDA double standard.” Yet, the letter’s publication also came with the potential risk that, if Ethan’s call for change was ineffective, his writing might inadvertently invite more harassment. Given the rewards and risks inherent to public rhetoric, the question of pedagogical conduct becomes all the more pressing: How should teachers conduct a public rhetoric and writing assignment, unit, or course?

Answers to this question abound, and a good number of them are intertwined with discussions of the letter-to-the-editor assignment. In fact, the letter-to-the-editor assignment is invoked by Nancy Welch, Gary A. Olson, and Bruce Herzberg, among others, as a straw figure against which carefully qualified arguments about the conduct of public rhetoric and writing pedagogy are advanced (Welch, “Living” 475; Olson x; Herzberg 397). The use of the letter-to-the-editor assignment as a straw figure is inconspicuous enough that Linda K. Shamoon and Eileen Medeiros cite the straw figures constructed by Welch, Olson, and Herzberg as they document “reservations in the discipline about letters to the editor” (184). Yet in the context of each respective argument, Welch, Olson, and Herzberg are not identifying problems with the letter-to-the-editor assignment per se, but rather problems with the poorly executed public rhetoric assignment that resides on shaky pedagogical ground.

These three public rhetoric and writing scholars are, in other words, clarifying the aims of public rhetoric and writing pedagogy through the figure of the letter-to-the-editor assignment. Welch constructs the letter-to-the-editor assignment straw figure in order to emphasize the challenge of teaching publicity as a verbal and physical struggle for visibility and voice (“Living” 477). Olson invokes the letter-to-the-editor assignment as he endorses a pedagogical approach to public rhetoric and writing that challenges pedagogues “to make our students’ writing experiences as authentic as possible” (x). Herzberg references the straw figure as he justifies the teaching of public rhetoric and writing assignments that spur good questions and retain the potential to affect public ideas (400). Thus, Welch, Olson, and Herzberg use the letter-to-the-editor straw figure to argue that public rhetoric and writing pedagogy should be conducted in accordance with the diverse aims of publicity, authenticity, and efficacy—wherein
• *Publicity* refers to the degree to which a composition is accessible, visible, or audible;

• *Authenticity* refers to the degree to which a composition is real, significant, or tangible;

• *Efficacy* refers to the degree to which a composition is capable of changing the status quo, impacting decisions, or spurring actions.

The arguments of Welch, Olson, and Herzberg support Diana George’s observations that a public rhetoric and writing assignment such as the letter to the editor can be quite discouraging if the pedagogical aims behind the assignment are reductive or singular in nature (qtd. in Mathieu 2).

The converse, then, also seems plausible: a public rhetoric and writing assignment such as the letter to the editor can be quite encouraging if the pedagogical aims behind it are substantive and diversified in nature. Christian R. Weisser’s discussion of the letter-to-the-editor assignment corroborates this point. Weisser, like Herzberg, notes well that a letter to the editor “could potentially be a useful writing assignment” (*Moving* 94, original emphasis). But instead of affirming the pedagogical conditions under which the letter-to-the-editor assignment could thrive, Weisser sets up the letter to the editor as a “one-way” assignment and then proceeds to highlight five important aspects of public writing, all of which might be understood as pertaining to public writing’s publicity, authenticity, or efficacy (94). Weisser assumes that by analyzing some of the salient aspects of public writing, teachers of public rhetoric and writing might be able to extend the analysis and develop “more constructive and meaningful public writing assignments and courses” (95). In other words, Weisser expects that his analysis of public writing will lead to revisions of public rhetoric and writing pedagogy.

Unfortunately, the pedagogical revisions to publicity, authenticity, and efficacy that Weisser anticipates have, by my reading, proceeded sporadically—often in isolation and regularly in opposition to some straw figure such as the letter-to-the-editor assignment. Consequently, these revisions have exerted only a limited impact on the discipline of rhetoric and writing studies and on the discipline’s pedagogical conduct. These revisions are all the more difficult to conceptualize for the teacher of public rhetoric and writing who asks students to craft letters to editors as part of an assignment, unit, or course. Teachers of public rhetoric and writing and especially teachers of letter-to-the-editor
assignments deserve an affirmative definition of public rhetoric and writing pedagogy in accordance with substantive and diversified aims—that is, an adroit articulation of public rhetoric and writing pedagogy capable of dealing with the rewards and risks within.

In the remainder of this piece, I attempt to elaborate an approach to public rhetoric and writing pedagogy that is conducted according to the tripartite aims of publicity, authenticity, and efficacy. In particular, I argue that understandings of these three concepts require expansion, so as to better address the rewards and risks of public rhetoric and writing. In order to expand upon these three concepts, I discuss two prevalent ways each aim can be configured and taught: publicity-as-condition and publicity-as-action, authenticity-as-location and authenticity-as-legitimation, and efficacy-as-persuasion and efficacy-as-participation. The discussion I offer is not meant to suggest that these two approaches to configuring each aim are mutually exclusive; rather, my intention is to illustrate the benefits of expanding our pedagogy to treat the six concepts as mutually influential, as well as crucial to our students’ experiences with public rhetoric and writing.

To further illustrate these benefits, I draw upon one of the most common and most misunderstood public rhetoric and writing assignments: the letter-to-the-editor assignment. As one of the oldest and most widely referenced public rhetoric and writing assignments, the letter to the editor serves as a touchstone for our discipline’s public rhetoric and writing teachers.3 Grounding my discussion in this assignment encourages public rhetoric and writing teachers to consider, by way of analogy and extension, the way in which the conduct of other public rhetoric and writing assignments, units, and courses might also benefit from an affirmative and expanded definition of public rhetoric and pedagogy.

**Publicity: Condition + Action**

Arguably, publicity constitutes the chief characteristic of public rhetoric and writing pedagogy, as it confers a sense of publicness on pedagogy. However, the concept of publicity is invoked by public rhetoric and writing teachers in two very different ways. The more conventional invocation considers publicity to be a condition primarily attached to rhetorical products (i.e., published pieces
that reach a public audience), while the less conventional invocation considers publicity to be an activity directed by rhetorical processes (i.e., moves made to constitute a public). As I explain below, the differences between the two notions of publicity are significant for the way they influence the conduct of our assignments, units, and courses, and public rhetoric and writing teachers would be well advised to emphasize process along with product, defining pedagogical publicity as activity as well as condition.

When publicity is understood as a condition, the publicness of our pedagogy becomes equally conditional, in that the publicness of our pedagogy depends on the ability of rhetorical products to interface with an amorphous public. When publicity is understood as a condition, the public, as Lloyd F. Bitzer recognizes, authorizes the public status of a given rhetorical product (“Rhetoric” 84). The public, according to Bitzer, possesses a “power of authorization,” which allows the public to review any person, group, or document submitted to it to accept or reject the submission, and thereby to certify or revoke public knowledge (89). Publicity, as such, is a condition of reception and review, and the pedagogy that follows from this notion of publicity merely attempts to provide students with opportunities to reach some already existing public. Thus, this pedagogy defers its publicness to some amorphous public, relinquishing any capacity to authorize publicity. As such, describing any rhetoric and writing pedagogy as public seems unfitting, for the public—not the pedagogy—serves as the “ground and authority” of public knowledge (Bitzer, “Rhetoric” 85).

However, when publicity is understood as an activity, pedagogy assumes power to authorize publicness. Understood as an activity, publicity signifies the processes by which a rhetor seeks, engages, and widens the attention of publics. Subsequently, the power of authorization resides with the active rhetor, and that activity can be guided through pedagogical instruction. In other words, this type of publicity refers to processes through which attention is constructed.¹ The pedagogy that follows from this understanding of publicity acknowledges the nuanced nature of various publics and understands publics as called into existence by rhetoric. Thus, this pedagogy teaches that rhetoric is constitutive of publics and emphasizes the processes through which student rhetors might make publics and public knowledge. The pedagogy that aligns with this second notion of publicity is the kind of pedagogy through which students would learn how to “take and make space,” as Welch would have them (“Living” 477, origi-

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nal emphasis). Furthermore, this pedagogy constitutes the kind of pedagogy through which students would learn, as Shamoon and Medeiros would have them, the momentum-building value of multiple rhetorical acts that extend across difference (187).

When we define public rhetoric and writing pedagogy as the activity of constituting publics in addition to the attempt to achieve the condition of publicness, we begin to affirm pedagogical conduct independent of forum or genre. Here, the letter-to-the-editor assignment serves as a prime example. The letter to the editor is often assigned in a way that tacitly endorses an understanding of publicity as a condition, in that the letter to the editor is framed as a public genre a priori—one that engages an existing public through writing that appears in the public forum of a newspaper. But when the assignment’s publicity is understood as a condition, the value of the letter to the editor as a public rhetoric assignment diminishes: only published letters achieve the condition of publicity, and the number of published letters to emerge from any one class is hardly sufficient to warrant the teaching of the assignment as public rhetoric. In my recent experience teaching the letter-to-the-editor assignment to 170 students over eight semesters, only 29 of those students saw their letters published. The vast majority of the letters to the editor written by my students never reached the monolithic public, and consequently these student projects did not meet the condition of publicity. Thus, conceiving of publicity as a condition and assigning students a letter to the editor results, more often than not, in a failing pedagogical project. This pedagogy only becomes public if the letters are published, and since most letters are not published, the public condition of this pedagogy does not follow. The product of the pedagogy retroactively revokes the pedagogy’s publicness.

Beyond waiting for a pedagogical product to certify or revoke the publicity of an assignment, unit, or course, we might further choose to conduct our public rhetoric and writing pedagogy in a way that endorses the notion of publicity as an activity. When we view publicity as the process of constituting a public, we stress the steps that students take seeking, engaging, and widening attention. Under such a conception of publicity, the letter to the editor remains a viable manifestation of public rhetoric and writing pedagogy. It is
in accordance with the understanding of publicity as activity that Nathaniel A. Rivers and Ryan P. Weber teach the letter to the editor as part of their public rhetoric and writing pedagogy (203). As Rivers and Weber note, the letter to the editor is but one text that is “intended to generate awareness” (203), and this intent is concomitantly an attempt at invoking an audience, as Andrea A. Lunsford and Lisa Ede might say (239), or constructing a public, as Rosa A. Eberly might say (175). Indeed, when publicity is understood as constructed through activity, the pedagogical viability of the letter to the editor as a public rhetoric assignment remains solid. As Shamoon and Medeiros explain, regardless of whether a student-written letter to the editor is published, “even a one-time personal public statement like a letter to the editor is a form of writing for engagement” (185). Engagement, here, refers to a process of engaging a public, a process that Shamoon and Medeiros use to define publicity. Thus, the process of engaging a public becomes more important than the product’s reach—that is, the process of writing a letter to the editor assumes more significance than the publication of that letter.

Expanding our understanding of publicity to include condition and action allows us to better guide our students through the rewards and risks embedded in teaching public rhetoric and writing. Expanding our understanding of publicity to include condition and action allows us to better guide our students through the rewards and risks embedded in teaching public rhetoric and writing.
Indeed, rather than attempting to reframe publicity as either condition or action, my current approach to teaching the letter-to-the-editor assignment accentuates both publicity-as-condition and publicity-as-action. To help my students’ textual products meet the condition of publicity, I encourage students to write to editors of smaller-scale publications, whether print or digital. Since the letters published by one publication are often quite different than the letters published by another publication, I also require students to analyze the letter-to-the-editor genre as it is manifested in their targeted publication by gathering a group of ten to fifteen letters published by their targeted publication, identifying any idiosyncrasies in those letters, and extrapolating generic conventions from those letters. To help students actively engage in a process that constitutes a public, I devote no fewer than two full weeks of my course to this assignment. During this time, students immerse themselves in the genre—reading, writing, reviewing, revising, and editing letters. Students test different strategies for attracting public attention and contemplate the viability of these moves in terms of their targeted publication. In other words, my pedagogy attempts to show my students that, contrary to what the genre’s typical length might suggest, the letter-to-the-editor assignment is not a quick, do-once-and-done assignment. Instead, publicity-as-action necessitates that a letter writer engage in sustained rhetorical activity.
Authenticity: Location + Legitimation

Authenticity functions as another aim of public rhetoric and writing pedagogy, and the concept is frequently invoked as the rationale behind the pedagogy. Public rhetoric and writing teachers often justify their pedagogy by claiming that a public rhetoric and writing pedagogical approach makes rhetoric and writing more real. This rationale positions—or locates—the pedagogy in proximity to an authentic rhetorical situation and also distances the learning of rhetoric and writing away from the classroom. However, as I discuss below, public rhetoric and writing teachers need to expand their definition of authenticity so that the concept also stresses the practices by which writers and readers rhetorically legitimate reality—that is, practices of legitimation that might be studied and developed in the classroom. Such an expanded view of authenticity admits that the debate over the relationship between rhetoric and reality is far from settled and, moreover, that this debate impacts the way in which we conduct our public rhetoric and writing pedagogy.

Public rhetoric and writing teachers frequently position reality as antecedent to rhetoric, in which case their assignments, units, and courses implicitly view rhetoric as responding to reality. These pedagogues subscribe to Bitzer’s theory of the rhetorical situation and, consequently, understand the concept of authenticity in terms of location. By locating authenticity in real rhetorical situations, these teachers endorse learning opportunities that put students in touch with reality and offer students a chance to respond to the “real world.” Thus, the suggestion is that, in order to increase authenticity, the classroom needs to be extricated from the pedagogical equation. Take, for example, Paul Heilker’s widely referenced assertion that “writing teachers need to relocate the where of composition instruction outside the academic classroom because the classroom does not and cannot offer students real rhetorical situations in which to understand writing as social action” (71, original emphasis). This statement privileges reality at rhetoric’s expense, intimating that relocation is among the chief tasks of the public rhetoric and writing teacher. In other words, this statement implies that the pedagogue’s decision to move his or her students out of school and into society leads to more authentic rhetoric and writing.

There are two problems with such a formulation. The first problem is that Bitzer’s theory of the rhetorical situation provides a nearly circular definition of authenticity, which renders it nearly impossible to locate a real, or authentic, rhetorical situation. According to Bitzer, “the world really invites change,” and change occurs through fitting rhetoric, which responds to a rhetorical situa-
Bitzer distinguishes between real rhetorical situations, sophistic situations, and fictive situations through each situation’s exigence—wherein a contrived exigence leads to an inauthentic situation, and a genuine exigence leads to an authentic rhetorical situation (11). Yet, the characteristics of a rhetorical exigence are not made clear, and this lack of clarity results in a nearly circular theory: authentic rhetoric responds to real rhetoric situations and modifies a genuine exigence; authenticity is defined by reality that is defined by genuineness. As Joseph Petraglia reminds us, the lack of clarity surrounding “what constitutes a genuine rhetorical exigence” poses a significant challenge to the study and teaching of rhetoric and writing (19, original emphasis).

The second problem with this formulation is that it pits school against society, which leaves the rhetoric and writing teacher without a viable way to conduct public rhetoric and writing pedagogy. As David Fleming observes, critiquing school as inauthentic is the “most prevalent critique of school from the point of view of rhetoric’s public turn,” and this critique locks us into a grossly reductive binary where school is vilified as inauthentic and set against a society valorized for its authenticity (212, 225). Here, the thinking seems to follow Petraglia’s claim that any writing pedagogy “encourages inauthentic writing” and that the best a writing teacher can do is attempt to “escape” from the classroom by relocating his or her students from the seats to the streets (19, 26). However, escaping from the classroom does not address the assumptions about authenticity propagated by the binary. The binary is predicated on a distinction between exigencies, wherein opportunities compelled by—and not merely located in—school by way of a teacher invite less authentic responses, or what Petraglia refers to as pseudotransactional writing (20–21). Thus, the teacher contributes to the problem of inauthenticity and cannot possibly escape it, since any pedagogy presents inauthentic rhetorical opportunities to students.

To avoid this situational binary that fundamentally rejects pedagogy, public rhetoric and writing teachers need to supplement the definition of authenticity that is tied to location with a definition that connotes the practices by which a writer or reader might legitimate reality. Indeed, Vatz’s repudiation of the rhetorical situation allows rhetoric to become
a “supreme discipline” (161), which can be taught by the public rhetoric and writing pedagogue without any forfeit of authenticity. Expanding the definition of authenticity so that it includes the practices by which a writer or reader might legitimate reality further enables public rhetoric and writing teachers to abandon the tired and ultimately unsuccessful project of attempting to escape inauthentic writing tasks. Petraglia, in fact, reminds us that the value of an authentic writing task is not merely located in an objective reality, but also in an ability and willingness to legitimate the task (29). Thus, exploring the degree to which writers and readers are “able or willing to legitimate [the exigence behind a task] as real” allows public rhetoric and writing teachers to acknowledge, confront, and reflect upon the pseudotransactional nature of the rhetoric and writing that is associated with any pedagogy, as Petraglia would have us (29, original emphasis).

By supplementing our understanding of authenticity-as-location with an understanding of authenticity-as-legitimation, public rhetoric and writing teachers position rhetorical instruction as integral to authenticity—that is, to the development of rhetorical practices that writers and readers use to legitimate reality. Here, again, this expanded definition calls for a reconsideration of the authenticity of letter-to-the-editor assignments. For example, in After the Public Turn: Composition, Counterpublics, and the Citizen Bricoleur, Frank Farmer appraises the authenticity of a letter-to-the-editor assignment that requires students to write and submit a letter to a real editor. For Farmer, this assignment’s location is overdetermined by academic institutions as well as media outlets. Subsequently, Farmer suggests that this particular iteration of the “school-sanctioned rehearsal genre of the ‘letter to the editor’” limits students’ understandings of real writing (83). As he problematizes conceptions of real writing and argues for an expanded notion of public writing, Farmer parrots the “unspoken request” that he finds embedded in some letter-to-the-editor assignments—one that beseeches students to “change [their] attitude about what counts as real writing” (84, original emphasis). While Farmer’s analysis suggests that public rhetoric and writing teachers should avoid this unspoken request by locating real writing in more authentic genres and bringing these genres into their classrooms, I would argue that any aspect of public rhetoric and writing pedagogy, including assigning a letter to the editor, constitutes a request for students to change their attitude—not necessarily about what counts as real writing, but about what is real writing. The change in attitude that rhetorical instruction should bring about in students is the awareness that real writing is legitimated by the practices of writers and readers.
When we define authenticity in terms of legitimation as well as location, we admit the possibility that even pseudotransactional writing can be legitimated as authentic, and this possibility has helped me navigate some of the challenges of teaching the letter-to-the-editor assignment. One such challenge occurred recently when a letter written by a student named Graham was published in the Kalamazoo Gazette. Graham's letter argued that technology distracts us from our daily work, and the letter's first line unabashedly revealed that it was written, at least in part, as a response to an assignment.

Graham's letter opened with the sentence: “While typing this letter as an assignment, contemplating how to make it relevant to class and as a letter to the editor, I keep getting distracted by Facebook and online news” (Barnard). Graham's letter cleverly embraced its pseudotransactional nature as support for its larger argument, but in doing so it challenged my understanding of authenticity to the point that I was unsure of how to respond to the letter.

Graham was the only student in his class to directly reference the pseudotransactional nature of the letter; yet his letter was one of the few in the class to successfully relocate itself in society. As such, I questioned the purported authenticity of my pedagogy, since Graham's letter had thwarted my attempt to escape the classroom and simultaneously illustrated the way in which the grossly reductive binary that pits school against society does not hold. Graham's letter demonstrated the way in which writing and rhetoric blur boundaries between school and society. I also questioned what Graham had really risked by locating his writing in the classroom and what the Kalamazoo Gazette had really rewarded by relocating a self-disclosed assignment in society. Configuring authenticity according to writing’s proximity to a real rhetorical situation offered me few answers. Rather, Graham's letter called for an expanded configuration of authenticity that not only embraces location but also embraces the practices by which writers and readers legitimate reality. Indeed, location may influence the authenticity of a letter to the editor; as Amy J. Devitt notes, “The letter to the editor written for an assignment in a writing class may be a different genre from the letter to the editor written out of concern for a local issue” (22, my emphasis). Nevertheless, as Graham's letter demonstrated, location must not function as the sole criterion upon which the authenticity
of the letter-to-the-editor assignment is judged, for even the letter to the editor that is written inside the classroom can be legitimated by readers outside the classroom.

To expand my students’ understandings of authenticity, I address, through writing and discussion, assumptions about school, society, and reality. First, my students and I reflect upon the presumed authenticity of an assigned letter to the editor, as its authenticity might be distinguished from that of an unassigned letter to the editor or a prepared letter to the editor. Then, we problematize these distinctions by asking where these ideas about authenticity originate and by studying letters, such as Graham’s letter, which hover around presumed boundaries of authenticity. More often than not, the resulting discussion leads my students to consider practices of legitimation, in addition to location, as essential to authenticity. Students become further sensitized to these practices of legitimation by considering the argumentation at work in the letters sent to editors, as well as in the online comments that respond to these letters. As we walk through the arguments that appear in particular letters and comments, I ask students if the writer of the letter or comment is making a legitimate point—that is, a point that the students (as readers) are willing to grant the writer on the basis of his or her argumentation. The discussion that accompanies this activity is typically successful in underscoring the fact that authenticity is bound to location as much as to the rhetorical practices that a writer or reader uses to legitimate reality.

Efficacy: Persuasion + Participation

A final concept—that of efficacy—guides public rhetoric and writing pedagogy by emphasizing what many teachers understand as public rhetoric and writing pedagogy’s long-stated goal: to modify the status quo via the art of persuasion, or to effect change. This goal, again, seems congruent with Bitzer’s model of the rhetorical situation in which rhetoric works to modify, alter, or change a given situation. But Bitzer’s model positions efficacy as a murky concept, clouded by the notion of change, for which teachers have neither tactic nor measure. Recently, however, some public rhetoric and writing pedagogues have amended Bitzer’s model, formulating the model of rhetorical ecology. This model, as I explain below, suggests an expanded aim for public rhetoric and writing pedagogy, under which efficacy is configured as participation toward change and participation becomes the goal of public rhetoric and writing pedagogy.
Public rhetoric and writing pedagogy attempts to instruct students in the use of language to effect change. This goal often ends up defining the pedagogical approach. As Weisser argues, teaching “public writing more easily allows students to see that language is a powerful tool for swaying opinions and actions” (“Public” 231). Put differently, enacting change through language constitutes the purpose behind public rhetoric and writing pedagogy, and this purpose is closely aligned with Bitzer’s theory of the rhetorical situation. According to Bitzer, rhetoric creates discourse that leads to change—via the audience—in thought as well as action (“Rhetorical” 4). “In this sense,” Bitzer tells us, “rhetoric is always persuasive” (4). Change thus marks rhetoric as persuasive; change signals efficacy.

However, in the public rhetoric and writing classroom focused on the production of efficacious texts, the dependence of efficacy upon change presents a problem—namely, that change can only be measured post facto. While it is well disposed to the rhetorical critic who assesses a text’s effectiveness retrospectively (i.e., the analysis of change), Bitzer’s theory does not lend itself as well to the rhetorical pedagogue who guides learners in the crafting of effective texts (i.e., the production of change), that is, outside of analyses of texts. The distinction between analysis and production that I’m making here might seem trivial, especially to those of us, myself included, who see the analysis of texts as critical to the production of texts. Indeed, reception and production are two sides of the same coin, but defining production in terms of analysis is a “definition in relief” that is strikingly complicit with the “definition by negation (of a straw figure)” all too common among public rhetoric and writing pedagogues.10

An affirmative definition of efficacy and, subsequently, public rhetoric and writing pedagogy requires us to confront the problem of change more proactively. If change or persuasiveness can only be detected, measured, understood, or analyzed after discourse has been enacted and language has been used, then we ought to more earnestly work to instruct students to produce change by focusing on factors that move toward, lead to, enable, or facilitate change. An affirmative definition of efficacy must, in other words, begin with the initial step rhetors must take to attempt change, and that step appears to be participation.
Expanding our understanding of efficacy to include both an understanding that associates efficacy with persuasion and an understanding that associates efficacy with participation necessitates that we adopt a model of rhetoric that emphasizes the larger rhetorical ecologies, which encompass multiple rhetorical situations. The model of rhetorical ecology stresses the participation of people in a complex web of histories, objects, interests, and texts. This model, as Jenny Rice argues, demands not only that we understand ourselves as already participating in multiple networks, but also that we rethink our understanding of participation (164–65, 169, 86, 96). As it pertains to rhetorical ecologies, participation connotes one’s way of using discourse to position oneself within the ecology. Thus, as Rice suggests, participation occurs even if an individual’s discourse attempts to disengage from, or not participate in, the ecology.

This ecological notion of participation also alters our understanding of effect, so that any discourse necessarily affects the ecology in multiple and distributed ways. In the ecological web, rhetorical effects might be thought of as subtle pushes and pulls on the web instigated by discursive participation. These subtle pushes and pulls contrast markedly with the more direct force that persuasion exerts on a situation in order to change that situation. Persuasion, of course, can emerge from the web-like ecological model, but persuasion is not the only metric for effect. As Byron Hawk notes, rhetorical ecologies do not effect change or solve problems—that is, they do not “revolve around policy,” at least not in any direct manner (90). Rather, rhetorical ecologies articulate or assemble “the conditions for the emergence of solutions” (90). While solutions or persuasion might occur within the ecology, the point remains that other effects—neither solutions nor persuasions—occur as well. Thus, the model of the rhetorical ecology admits that the rhetoric and writing to emerge from our pedagogy produces a range of effects, some large and some small, some risky and some rewarding.

The benefits of basing a public rhetoric and writing pedagogy on the ecological model of rhetoric are manifold. For example, Rivers and Weber contend that a pedagogy built upon the model of rhetorical ecology allows students to better advocate for local change. Following David Coogan, Rivers and Weber contend that the ecological model facilitates more effective rhetoric—that is, rhetoric more capable of advocating for change, where change is “syonymous with replacing, adding, removing, modifying, expanding, or strengthening a policy” (203). Rivers and Weber’s argument is convincing, and their revision to our understanding of change makes progress in addressing the problem that
change poses for efficacy. However, even the inclusive revision of change does not go far enough in affirming the initial step rhetors must take to make change. An ecological understanding of rhetorical efficacy is predicated first on participation, and though it need not, this participation may lead to policy change. To echo Hawk, rhetorical ecologies do not revolve around policy change. They are, however, premised on participation, and our expanded definition of public rhetoric and writing pedagogy must make this initial premise clear: the primary pedagogical aim of ecological public rhetoric and writing pedagogy is participation through discourse.

Public rhetoric and writing teachers should, therefore, conduct public rhetoric and writing pedagogy in a way that emphasizes the premise of participation in addition to emphasizing the possibility of persuasion. Public rhetoric and writing teachers should, therefore, conduct public rhetoric and writing pedagogy in a way that emphasizes the premise of participation in addition to emphasizing the possibility of persuasion. Once again, the letter-to-the-editor assignment illustrates the pedagogical purchase of such an expansion. When efficacy is understood as persuasive discourse aimed at change in thought, action, or policy, the letter-to-the-editor assignment becomes emblematic of the “one-way assignments” that Weisser decries (Moving 94). The sole goal of the one-way letter (or, for that matter, of the pedagogy that teaches that assignment) is persuasion that leads to change—whether change in opinion, change in policy, or both. As Weisser explains, when no change can be measured, “[s]tudents come to feel that participating in public discourse [. . .] has little effect on what happens in their world” (Moving 94). According to Weisser, the lack of detectable efficacy leads students to “surmise that the public sphere is a realm where nothing actually gets accomplished—at least not by them” (“Public” 232; Moving 94). In sum, Weisser denounces the ineffectiveness of the one-way version of the letter-to-the-editor assignment on the grounds that the letter’s efficacy is dependent upon a policy change that the letter brings about.

However, when the efficacy of the letter-to-the-editor assignment is expanded so that it is understood in terms of participation that may lead to persuasion, public rhetoric and writing pedagogy embraces the fullness of the ecological model by seeing the wide range of effects—persuasive or not—within. In the ecological model, an assigned letter to the editor occupies a role in the ecology, and consequently the assignment’s efficacy is determined by participation and not necessarily limited to change. In other words, participation will
always result in some effect, and we should conduct our pedagogy, stressing the efficacy derived from participation first and foremost. Thus, we ought to follow Gwendolyn D. Pough’s “Empowering Rhetoric: Black Students Writing Black Panthers” by acknowledging that participating in writing letters to editors constitutes a kind of efficacy in and of itself that may then lead to change.

Pough traces an ecology—a web connecting pedagogy, students, faculty, administrators, campus, organizations, autobiographies, proposals, lists, and letters to editors—and, in doing so, begins to make the relationship between participation and efficacy clear. Pough understands that change only follows participation, that it is only “through public participation and writing” that individuals can create change (469). Pough’s discussion of participation suggests that effects necessarily follow from writing a letter to the editor. Take for instance, Pough’s student Joanne, whose letter to the editor resulted in administrators intrusively scrutinizing her academic history. The startling effects of Joanne’s letter—chief among them the administrative backlash—far overshadowed Joanne’s aim in effecting changes in thought, action, and decision making. Put differently, Joanne’s participation within the ecology led to immediate effects well before and well outside of persuasion. Thus, writing letters to editors may fall short of persuasion, may not always affect policy, and may not result in anything close to a positive change, but the effects of this participation are no less palpable.

As public rhetoric and writing teachers, we need to emphasize the non-persuasive effects of public rhetoric and writing as well as the persuasive ones, showing our students that their very participation in the ecology pushes and pulls at the web in subtle and not-so-subtle ways that have consequences. Here, I’m reminded of a letter to the editor written by a student named Ann, which led to effects not necessarily configured as persuasion. Ann’s letter emerged out of a rhetorical ecology involving my pedagogy, an inquiry-based writing assignment, field research, and the American Heart Association’s Go Red for Women campaign (Dziedziula). Prior to writing letters to editors, our class spent time discussing the web of texts, interests, objects, and histories that contribute to letters submitted to editors of newspapers. We also discussed the way in which already participating in the ecology will undoubtedly lead to effects and, following Rice, the way in which an individual positions himself or
herself in relation to the ecology through discourse compounds those effects.

Ann’s letter carved out a unique position in that the letter abandoned the strong argumentative stance she developed through her research and writing on the Go Red for Women campaign and adopted a more advisory stance that provided information about charitable giving. By suggesting that readers visit a website to determine the percentage of their donations that actually reach the charitable cause, Ann’s letter did attempt to effect change, but this change was far from the policy-oriented change that her earlier research might have supported. I distinctly recall thinking that Ann’s letter to the editor could have been much more effective had it adopted her earlier stance that argued for policy change. But upon a second thought, I realized that my thinking was indicative of the situational model of rhetoric that defined efficacy in terms of persuasion—that is to say, a definition more restrictive than that of the ecological and participatory one that I had used to conduct my pedagogy.

As I needed to remind myself, efficacy begins with participation and in many cases leads to persuasion. Ann’s letter also reminded me of this point when it was published by the *Kalamazoo Gazette*. Like so many news outlets, the *Kalamazoo Gazette* offers readers a digital platform with which to respond to its letters, among them Ann’s letter. Though few in number, the three comments written in response to Ann’s letter speak to the letter’s effect. The first comment implores readers to visit an additional website about donating to veterans’ organizations and provides a link to that website. The second comment reiterates the first comment, and the third comment simply states: “Great advice, Ann!” Importantly, these comments suggest that an expanded notion of persuasion—one that begins with participation—was at work in Ann’s letter. These comments attest to the efficacy of Ann’s letter, in that her participation in discourse pulled other individuals closer to her text and compelled them to create three texts of their own. The pull of Ann’s letter widened the rhetorical ecology and in doing so affected the ecology within which it participated.

When I ask students like Ann to write a letter to the editor, I usually introduce a broad concept of efficacy early in the project through a sequence of listing, mapping, and writing heuristics. I introduce these heuristics to my students after they have identified the focus of their letters but before they write a first draft. These heuristics emphasize the ever-widening effects of participation—persuasive and nonpersuasive, direct and indirect, intended and unintended, known and unknown—in accordance with the ecological model of rhetoric. First, my students list the people, histories, objects, interests,
and texts to which the topic of their letter is known to be directly connected. I challenge my students to write an exhaustive list that contains a minimum of one hundred items. Next, they create a second list that enumerates those items to which their letter topic might be indirectly connected. This second list requires students to speculate, but it is by way of this speculation that many students come to understand the way in which effects ripple and cascade in the ecological model. Then, I prompt students to map the items included on the first list, illustrating the relations among list items through proximity, pattern, and color. As part of this mapping exercise, I require students to visually account for the unknown and unintended relationships in which their letters are undoubtedly entangled. Finally, students review their maps, contemplating the potential effects of their letters on this ecology and considering the directionality of these effects. Guiding them in this activity are these four questions:

1. Upon what people, histories, objects, interests, and texts will this letter to the editor intentionally pull and push?
2. Upon what people, histories, objects, interests, and texts might this letter to the editor unintentionally pull and push?
3. How might you describe some of the directions in which you anticipate persuasion pushing or pulling on this web?
4. How could you describe some of the directions in which you anticipate nonpersuasive effects pushing or pulling on this web?

Oftentimes, students respond to these questions in writing, and their responses regularly evidence their widening understanding of the rhetorical ecology to which the letter-to-the-editor genre belongs.

Expanding the Potential of Response for the Teacher of Public Rhetoric and Writing

The result of expanding the aims of public rhetoric and writing pedagogy—so that publicity is understood as both action and condition, authenticity is understood as both legitimation and location, and efficacy is understood as both participation and persuasion—is a newfound responsiveness for the public rhetoric and writing pedagogue. Working under these expanded pedagogical aims, the public rhetoric and writing teacher can respond to the rewards and risks associated with the rhetoric and writing produced by students like Alejandra, Graham, Ann, and Ethan.
In the opening of this piece, I briefly described my response to reading Ethan’s letter in the pages of our campus newspaper: My feelings of success and satisfaction—what Susan Wells might describe as my initial “triumph” (326)—were dampened by an unsettling sense that I should have better accompanied Ethan and his classmates through this public rhetoric unit, navigating the risks and rewards there within. At the time, my public rhetoric and writing pedagogy offered me scant room for response. My pedagogy, as I saw it then, was overly dependent upon narrow aims that subscribed to a one-dimensional model of production and reception. When Ethan’s letter moved out of the classroom and went public, my overly narrow pedagogy suggested that Ethan had forfeited a good portion of the agency with which he could steer the reception of his letter. Ethan’s letter would either succeed or fail at persuading its readers to adopt his stance, and Ethan would be left to reap the rewards or suffer the consequences accordingly.

But had I configured my pedagogy according to more expansive aims, I believe that I would have been able to better respond to Ethan’s published letter. If Ethan were to be a student in my public rhetoric and writing course as I configure it now, and if I were reading his letter in the campus newspaper today, my work as his public rhetoric and writing teacher would just be beginning, as I would immediately start to leverage an expanded understanding of publicity, authenticity, and efficacy to emphasize Ethan’s continued agency as a rhetor. I would urge Ethan to take further rhetorical action in his attempts at constructing a public and suggest that he use genres beyond the letter to the editor to do so. I would point to the online comments that discuss Ethan’s letter as evidence that his letter was effective, since his participation encouraged other individuals to participate. (In Ethan’s case, some thirty comments, totaling 1,961 words, were written in a three-week period.) I would further encourage Ethan to enter the online comment forum and engage particular individuals in more prolonged interchanges. Finally, I would stress the degree to which reality is negotiated through the rhetorical practices that writers and readers use, illustrating the way in which instruction can help public rhetors hone those practices. Here, I would walk Ethan through the range of online responses—some fallacious, some syllogistic, some enthymatic; some arguing from analogy, some arguing from definition, some arguing from example, some arguing from principle; some criticizing the writer, some commending the writer; some wildly absurd and some stone-cold serious—that his letter received and consider rebuttals that might better advance Ethan’s reality.
All this is to say that one of the unanticipated effects of Ethan’s letter to the editor of the *Collegiate Times* was that it compelled me to search for a better response to my public rhetoric and writing students, to expand the aims of my pedagogy, and to more fully embrace what Wells refers to as the “complex array of discursive practices” that constitutes public discourse (328). Indeed, public discourse is complex, and as Ethan and the rest of the letter writers in my courses have taught me, the teaching of public discourse in the rhetoric and writing classroom is also complex. Public rhetoric and writing pedagogy is rewarding, it is risky, and it even anticipates a good number of headaches. Most of all, it requires careful, vigilant conduct—conduct guided by expanded conceptions of publicity, authenticity, and efficacy.

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**Notes**

1. The “Rutgers Webcam Spying Case” unfolded following the death of Tyler Clementi, a Rutgers University first-year student. Clementi committed suicide after his roommate broadcast an intimate video of Clementi. Among the questions raised by this case were questions about effects of publicity and expectations of privacy.
2. See Trebach’s editorial, Sims’s letter, and Campbell’s column.
3. In the 1963 volume of *College Composition and Communication*, Ken Macrorie and Robert G. Lambert offered two vociferous endorsements of the letter-to-the-editor assignment as an assignment that joined personal expression and public involvement (Macrorie 30–31; Lambert 167). These early characterizations of the letter-to-the-editor assignment anticipate a recurring conversation in public rhetoric and writing scholarship that discusses the relationship between public rhetoric and private rhetoric (Kent, Introduction 1; Couture 2; Kent, Preface ix; Dobrin 217) and between expressionist pedagogy and public rhetoric and writing pedagogy (Eberly 175; Shamoon and Medeiros 184, 191; Rice 165–68, 194–95).
4. Similarly, Shamoon and Medeiros “view publicity as a process—a process by which more and more individuals are drawn into the public debate on an issue and on its solution” (184). What this view leaves unresolved, however, is whether the process constitutes publicity because it meets the condition of “public debate,” or whether publicity is the activity of drawing upon individuals to form an audience.
5. Weisser provides a frank assessment of the limits of the newspaper as a public forum, arguing that tying publicity to the newspaper implies the best that public writing can do is "convince others to 'think differently'" ("Public" 246). Weisser's comments are, however, premised upon the understanding of publicity as a condition, not as an activity.

6. As both Bitzer ("Rhetoric" 68, 73–74) and Farmer (143–47) argue, distinctions between publics and audiences remain.

7. Shamoon and Medeiros not only understand publicity as activity, but they also endorse the letter-to-the-editor assignment. Their support of this assignment is refreshing, and it is bolstered by Medeiros's research on national activist groups (Public). Nevertheless, their description of the letter-to-the-editor assignment uses an if-then conditional construction to quite literally place conditions on the letter-to-the-editor assignment: "At a simple level of publicity, even a one-time personal public statement like a letter to the editor is a form of writing for engagement if—if—it genuinely adds to the public debate on an issue, if it is sent to a publication that is likely to publish the letter, and if that publication is part of a political public sphere in which that personal public statement is likely to have some consequences for the individual" (Shamoon and Medeiros 185).

8. Although it is not referred to as an “escape,” the movement of students from school into society in conjunction with a rhetoric and writing class is discussed by Pough (468–69), Mathieu (ix–xiv), Ervin ("Composition" 45–47), and Rice (166), among others.

9. Reader discusses the controversy over the contemporary use of prepared letters by advocacy groups attempting to spur letter-writing campaigns partly as a controversy over the authenticity of letters sent to editors (609).

10. To be clear: I agree with Rivers and Weber, Coogan, and others that a robust analysis of a rhetorical ecology provides for better learning. However, defining efficacy in terms of analysis does not affirm pedagogical strategies that lead to the production of efficacious texts.

11. Devitt, for instance, describes letters to editors as layering persuasion to meet a variety of different purposes (22).

12. Similarly, Bazerman sees participation as the starting point for the writer of a letter to the editor, arguing that "one sees a way of participating through the letter to the editor, and one then is so moved to write the letter" (463).
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