

Frank Farmer. *After the Public Turn: Composition, Counterpublics, and the Citizen Bricoleur*. Logan: Utah State University Press, 2013. 180 pages.

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Frank Farmer, in *After the Public Turn: Composition, Counterpublics and the Citizen Bricoleur*, uses the concept of “counterpublic” to reconceptualize composition as a discipline and propose a new way of constructing the composition classroom. Along the way, Farmer provides a helpful account of the history of the theory of “public spaces,” starting with Jurgen Habermas’s *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* and working through the revisions of the concept by contemporary critical theorists like Nancy Fraser and Michael Warner. He also focuses on what he takes to be a particular, model, counterpublic sphere: the “zines,” anarchist publications produced by amateurs and following no fixed model or guiding principle other than a persistent, punkish resistance to the mainstream culture. The counterpublic critiques and subverts the “mainstream” public space, organized on the principle of the “force of the better argument,” by mobilizing those voices, interests and styles the mainstream space excludes (considers non-“mainstream,” “marginal” and “irrational”). For Farmer, the zine exemplifies this ethos of radical critique of prevailing norms, with a concern, ultimately, not only for representing marginalized interests but, even more, for self-discovery and self-expression.

Farmer points to tendencies within composition studies that have shown an interest in theories of the public sphere, and has a lot more to say about how composition studies might be conceived as a disciplinary counterpublic (by intervening, for example, in public discussions of higher education in which composition is spoken *about* while compositionists remain invisible but could, Farmer claims, speak and act as if spoken *to*) than about understanding the classroom in these terms. When he does address the classroom, Farmer, not surprisingly, imagines the kind of student best suited to the pedagogy he proposes:

In sum, by introducing zines into our writing classrooms, we create an opportunity to introduce students to an alternative vision of democratic participation, a different understanding of *publicness* that they are unlikely to find in our institutions, our textbooks, and, for the most part, our pedagogies. What follows is that we also create an opportunity to both recognize and promote another kind of citizen—that kind of nameless citizen situated on the outskirts of official public life, distinguished by the fact that he or she is not distinguished at all. (88)

This project begs at least a couple of questions: What about the students who are quite happy with the kind of citizen they already are, or are dissatisfied with available forms of citizenship but in ways different than those that concern Farmer? Or the students who consider the whole question of citizenship uninteresting or irrelevant to a writing classroom? Perhaps they would be compelled to create their own counterpublics within

the classroom, and might thereby benefit in the same way as those students who take up the kind of rhetorical position offered them by the instructor. But leaving aside the question of how equipped such a classroom would be for that development, the more important question is: what is the benefit? In other words, what are students learning in such a class, why is it valuable that they learn it, and why in a composition class?

Farmer never asks these questions, and I assume that is because he sees the role of writing pedagogy as opening up previously unavailable rhetorical positions within public and institutional spaces. Public and institutional spaces are constitutively exclusive and, therefore, taking up a position which has been “othered” by those spaces and institutions and making that position recognizable within them *is* learning: learning how those spaces and institutions work, how they form and deform language, and what one might be capable of (what kind of identities one might end up cultivating) if enabled to deconstruct them. Such an approach would not necessarily deny the value of, say, the modern academy (as mainstream and exclusivist as it may be); rather, it would be making the somewhat paradoxical but not therefore invalid claim that the only way to access that value is to take up a position on the margin of the institution and challenge its claims.

The disciplines, though, may have far more to teach the students than the students the disciplines, and what they have to teach the students can only (we might argue) be learned by first of all learning the language of the discipline itself, and working within its terms. And resistance to what has been established might, in fact, provide a stunted form of learning, and one that reveals itself quickly to be remarkably dogmatic, coming with a strict list of marginalized positions one is obliged to represent. Beyond these considerations, though, is the problem of whether students, in the counterpublicist classroom, are doing what the class would have them do, and the further problem of how to make sense of their efforts. Let’s say we “find innovative ways to cultivate self-publication in our assignments and classroom projects, emphasizing to students that one goal of their projects is *to motivate others to write and publish as well*” (86). Once the students have performed this assignment or project, how can we tell what has happened? What distinguishes mimicry of the (explicit or implicit) model, an astute sense of the instructor’s expectations, and an evolved ability to mirror those expectations, from the acquisition of some capacity that might take on other forms in other contexts? What would count as a productive mistake, one that serves the diagnostic purpose of showing us what students can and cannot do, and the instructional purpose of suggesting another move the student might try, from mistakes that may be less relevant (like those that simply reflect an unfamiliarity with the particular genre of writing the class has been exposed to, or the same difficulty in intuiting teacherly expectations that has perhaps hindered the student in previous writing classes)? I don’t believe that a counterpublicist pedagogy is able to answer such questions.

A pedagogy that treats the composition classroom as a preparation for entering the disciplines, and as itself a disciplinary space, can answer them, though Learning to write within the disciplines involves identifying and breaking up the commonplaces students bring to the classroom, and arranging language in new ways, in accord with shared rules. Doing this requires maximal regulation (very clear rules within a directive assignment

that asks students to perform some move that can be publicly examined) but minimal assumptions about issues such as genre, the intentions of the author of text used in class, the expected rhetorical stance of the student writer, the construction of an imagined “audience”—anything, that is, that requires the student to seek insight into the instructor’s expectations (what the teacher “wants me to say”). If one is to ask a student to, say, pick any place in the text to start from, and then perform some “operation” on that part of the text (for example, show how different readings of a passage would foreground and background different textual or grammatical elements) and then use the results of that operation as a frame for reading the rest of the text, we cannot also expect students to inhabit a historically specific rhetorical position.

Much of the material brought to bear by Farmer is, though, useful in thinking through such a “disciplinary” classroom. The improvisational spirit Farmer finds in the zines, which would have the student as “bricoleur” thrown back upon his or her own resources and forced to make meaning out of the materials at hand, is absolutely necessary in the disciplinary classroom. Similarly, Farmer’s call to have students write as if for fellow writers who are to be inspired by the student writer’s own work suggests a transformation of the classroom consonant with the disciplinary classroom’s systematic use of student work and construction of the students as fellow inquirers. Dialogue between those invested in the disciplinary classroom and the counterpublicist pedagogical strategy is further enabled by the sense, implicit in the notion of “disciplinary counterpublics” that Farmer explores: that disciplines are social products and ever changing formations, not static bodies or progressive accumulations of knowledge. Since that is the case, part of what it means to participate in a discipline is to be willing to entertain seemingly “wild” hypotheses, which certainly requires some of the public courage and willingness to seek out positions from which to speak within seemingly impermeable discourses the counterpublicist pedagogy would like to instill in its students. The difference in the respective approaches I have outlined here, though, is that the disciplinary approach would encourage students to think of the “long run” of the disciplinary spaces, through all of their unanticipated transmutations and ramifications, as the arena of possible vindication for the wild hypothesis, rather than a spirit of resistance that must be, for a great many students, a mere simulation and, from a pedagogical perspective, is not necessarily any more useful than a “conformist” stance that pushes the perceived rules of the discipline to their limits.