Situating the Public and Personal in Student Writing

Isaacs, Emily J. and Phoebe Jackson, eds. *Public Works: Student Writing as Public Text.* Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook Publishers, 2001. 117 pages. $19.00

Paley, Karen Surman. *I-Writing: The Politics and Practice of Teaching First-Person Writing.* Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2001. 240 pages. $25.00 (paper), $50.00 (cloth).

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Emily Isaacs and Phoebe Jackson's *Public Works: Student Writing as Public Text* and Karen Paley's *I-Writing: The Politics and Practice of Teaching First-Person Writing,* both represent student writing from different ends of a spectrum, with Isaacs and Jackson looking at the ways that student writing is made public and Paley focusing on the value of personal, first-person writing for students. What these texts share, however, is a focus on classroom practice and the theories that underlie our approaches to various kinds of writing. They also pay close attention to the ethics and problems that these visions can bring, serving as effective guides to teachers seeking to work with the ideas they present.

More specifically, *Public Works* is a collection that complicates what it means for texts to be "public" and the pedagogical implications for such perspectives. The contributors to this volume expand and problematize notions of publicity by performing critical self-reflections on their own teaching practices, encouraging a more nuanced understanding of the relationships and boundaries between public and private. *I-Writing,* on the other hand, focuses almost exclusively on personal (expressivist) writing, using an ethnography of communication approach to classroom research. However, in her analysis, Paley pushes these "personal" student texts outside a realm of self-interest towards an appreciation for

the ways that these students' work interacts with the world. Both books, then, despite their opposing emphases, enact a healthy tension between personal and public writing.

Public Works offers as an explicit aim the need to conceptualize what it means for students to be treated as *writers*: we need to avoid limiting students' writing simply because it is written by students. In their introduction, Isaacs and Jackson write,

> it all seems rather easy and simple: Writing teachers must be, with increasing frequency, developing courses that enable and perhaps mandate public writing. [. . .] Among the many differences we might have, the value of writing for audiences beyond the teacher seems almost universally valued" (ix).

When we move beyond the theory, though, we need to raise questions about how such pedagogies are to be enacted. For instance, how do we conceive of these "public" audiences? How do we develop criteria for evaluating this writing? What are the ethics of such moves in our classrooms? In attempting to respond to these questions, the contributors to the volume bring a practical element to the discussion, above all, trying to elaborate on variations of this question: How does the move towards "publicity," in fact, get enacted within a classroom space?

One of the most powerful elements of this collection is its emphasis on reflective practice. Each of the essays draws from personal experience and gleans theoretical insights from those practices, and then returns with those insights back to classroom practice. In this way, the contributors navigate a fine line between abstract generalizations about publicity and practical concerns that guide the theory's engagement in classrooms (or, in some cases, outside the classroom). Another strength of this collection is the range of voices represented: while most of the essays are written by professors, there is an essay written by a graduate student (Benda), and a collaboratively written essay by two recent undergraduates (Palmeri and Daum). The benefits of this variety is obvious, but the conversations the essays provoke also serve to help teachers locate themselves within the various practices advocated throughout the collection.

The collection is divided into three sections with four chapters each, moving from reflective theoretical discussions of publicity to a more specific enactment of publicity (writing online) to a section dealing with pedagogical strategies within classrooms themselves. Each of the four sections maintains an impressive thematic unity, while presenting essays with diverse perspectives. For example, in Part 1, Andrea Stover's essay, "Redefining Public/Private Boundaries in the Composition Classroom,"

argues that there is a necessary balance in every classroom between the privacy and the publicity of a piece of text. As teachers, we need to respect that balance as we work to make classrooms/students' writing public because, "[i]f a person's emotional and intellectual responses to a theory or practice are at odds with one another, the emotional response will almost always win out. And in my experience, issues of privacy provoke more intense emotional responses than intellectual ones" (3). Stover's insight leads to a conception of writing's relationship to publicity (and privacy) in which definitions for these terms need to be negotiated and understood by both the students and the teacher(s), even if one's understandings are incomplete. From Stover's essay, the collection moves to Amy Lee's "Embodied Processes: Pedagogies in Context." Lee's essay introduces a different angle from which we might conceive of the "public" move: if the classroom itself is to be treated as a kind of public in which students share their work with each other, we need to teach our students not only how to address various audiences, but how to *read* works intended for those audiences. Shari Stenberg shows how students may not be empowered, but rather, silenced by some public formats, encouraging caution as we design these pedagogical strategies. And finally, Amy Goodburn reminds us of some of the ethical struggles that arise when asking students to write about community experiences, asking how that work has effects on other students, as well as on the communities being written about.

The first section of the book thus serves as a nice introduction to the complex theoretical issues surrounding these moves towards various "publics," staying firmly grounded within the classroom. The next two sections move further away from the unitary "classroom": "The Virtual Public" moves to the Internet, while "The Pedagogy of Public Writing" explores what happens when students write for (not about) communities that exist outside the realm of the classroom. The essays are arranged thematically, but present diverse perspectives and theoretical grounds.

Paley's *I-Writing* is also wide-ranging, as she focuses on classroom spaces, but employs a number of voices to portray the students, teachers, and writing at the core of her study. The central part of *I-Writing* is a semester-long ethnographic study of two teachers at Boston College, which makes up the middle four chapters of the book. Paley's main goal, as she puts it, is "to affirm the value of teaching, or rather allowing, our students to write narrative (as well as expository, descriptive, and persuasive) essays in the first person" (7). A second goal is to show the different ways that "expressivism" can be implemented as a pedagogical practice.

The opening chapter, "The Social Construction of 'Expressivist' Pedagogy," is a critique of how expressivism has been discussed in taxonomies of composition and rhetoric as a field. Paley cites James Berlin and Lester Faigley in particular as influential critiques of expressivist writing, arguing that their descriptions of expressivism are reductive and ignore much of its diversity and complexity. Further, she suggests that when talking about expressivism, our focus should be to take a closer look at actual classroom practice. In this way, she prepares readers for the chapters that follow: six of her eight chapters focus on classroom practice (four are from her own ethnography; one is a reading of Kathleen Cassity's ethnography of Peter Elbow, and one is an account of a visit to Patricia Bizzell's classroom).

In each ethnographically-based chapter, Paley works to show how personal writing is not contained within a writer's individual self: exposing one's personal writing to a larger public (whether that public is the teacher, other members of the class, or Paley herself) almost always requires that one also engage with larger issues involved in that piece of writing. For example, in discussing one student, Janet, Paley's analysis revolves around Janet's representation of and talk about homeless people, a project both personal (because it involves Janet's volunteer work, and because it stemmed out of Janet's own feelings of emotional homelessness) and public (because Janet is dealing with communities and issues outside of her personal sphere). However, much of the chapter also attempts to work through Paley's feelings of "irritation" with Janet. This irritation, as Paley describes it, stems from her personal response to Janet, as well as "frustration" with the way Helena worked with Janet during conferences. In the end, both researcher and teacher feel limited with regard to Janet's ability to integrate a critical element into her writing. Paley takes pains to point out here that expressivism does not allow writers to write whatever they feel—that, in fact, it demands a different kind of engagement with text.

Another student, Catherine, writes a personal essay dealing with her father's alcoholism, which leads her to a paper dealing with alcohol on college campuses. Paley shows Catherine's transition between these two papers through a careful narration of Catherine's conferences with Helena as well as of the texts she produced. Describing Helena's work with Catherine, Paley writes,

> At the heart of the pedagogy is the belief that it is important for students to write about what matters to them. Rather than abandon that principle for the sake of teaching an author-evacuated mode of discourse, the kind of research

paper Lester Faigley valorizes in *Fragments of Rationality*, Helena retained it in order to facilitate the learning process. (109)

Throughout *I-Writing*, Paley integrates her description of these expressivist classroom practices with her own understandings and reactions to the activity. She's careful to situate herself very specifically, laying out her biases and explaining her reactions in what are often very personal terms. However, while in *Public Works* I found myself drawn into what felt like an ongoing conversation, one that remained yet to be decided and which I could add to, complete, and revise to suit my own pedagogy, *I-Writing* maintains a strong emphasis on the benefits of expressivist writing. I kept waiting for a critique, for cautions or warnings, for potential pitfalls along the way. The closest Paley comes, however, is to express her "frustration" with Helena's treatment of Janet.

For the most part, it feels as if Paley's desire to affirm the value of expressivism leads to a relatively uncritical treatment of it as a pedagogy. For instance, Paley makes clear her argument that we need to attend to actual classroom practice in conceptualizing what it means to be expressivist. However, what she doesn't ask is about the ways the theories underlying expressivist pedagogy might be problematic for these instructors and their students. Further, the definition Paley offers of expressivism, that it is "a pedagogy that includes (but is by no means limited to) an openness to the use of personal narrative, a particular type of the narrative mode of discourse" (13), is so focused on *practice* that it neglects any theoretical cohesion that might underlie that practice. If expressivism is to be seen as more than "personal narrative," teachers need to begin to do more than exhort its value: they need to reflect on the problems it raises, to see ways to address those problems, and to investigate the relationships between what they do and why they do it. While Paley is focused on looking at expressivism as a practice, without theory, that practice becomes what Ann Berthoff refers to as recipe-swapping, and fails to engage teachers in *reflective* practice. With that, I return to *Public Works* as a model of how theory and practice come together and engage teachers and writing program administrators. Despite what I see as *I-Writing*'s thinness with respect to pedagogical theory, these texts, taken together, do much to help teachers situate their practices and to forward redefinitions of what we do in our classrooms.