BOOK REVIEW


Reviewed by:
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In *The Way Literacy Lives: Rhetorical Dexterity and Basic Writing Instruction*, Shannon Carter provides a history of how basic writing programs came into existence. She reviews the testing phenomenon that necessitated a change in how composition was taught. She notes that public school educational reform throughout the 1980s led to a culture of “standards” that were “shaped and measured by state-mandated testing” (3). This reform changed high school graduation and college entrance requirements, and led to testing becoming central to discussions about writing instruction and assessment. Further, Carter examines how bureaucracy can change and constrain the structure and focus of basic writing classrooms. Within this context, she reviews how basic writing teachers and tutors are being pressured and mandated to “fix” struggling writers, while at the same time composition scholars understand that “real writing instruction is not about repair work” (8). By outlining a concise history of the past decades of open admissions and changing K-12 teaching methods, she gives a glimpse into how basic writing programs developed and evolved, as well as where they (and we) need to go. This synopsis on the history of basic writing instruction is particularly useful for young academics, and provides a framework for the systems within which basic writing programs operate.

Following discussion of the historical context, Carter goes on to discuss the “pedagogy of rhetorical dexterity” that emerged from her work with basic writers (14). She notes that rhetorical dexterity is “a pedagogical approach that develops in students the ability to effectively read, understand, manipulate, and negotiate the cultural and linguistic codes of a new community of practice based on a relatively accurate assessment of another, more familiar one” (14). This pedagogy requires that we value basic writers’ expertise, which is demonstrated in their varied literacies, including work and leisure. The idea that there are multiple literacies isn’t necessarily a new concept, but Carter’s approach furthers the discussion about what constitutes literacy and introduces approaches we can take in the basic writing classroom using the literacies with which our basic writers are already proficient. Carter provides numerous examples of the literacies basic writers may already have, and expands these examples into ways these literacies can be
utilized to engage basic writers. Clearly, Carter’s experiences and research provide an interesting perspective on basic writing.

Part of the reason this book is so engaging is because Carter takes on assumptions that exist and surround literacy. She makes some statements that may surprise politicians and academics alike. One such statement includes, “Literacy is not, in fact, a prerequisite for individual progress” (31). She supports this assertion with examples of people who would traditionally be deemed “illiterate” in our popular culture, but who have been able to thrive in their careers and personal lives.

Carter’s pedagogy is clearly designed to help students reflect on their own literacies, and to empower them. However, she asserts that while critical perspectives inform her approach, she is leery of imposing on students her own political agenda because sometimes critical pedagogy can be as domineering as trying to liberate students from oppressive forces. Instead, she wants basic writing programs to be informed by a “situated perspective of literacy as it functions in the real lives of students” (59). While she may not be overtly introducing critical pedagogy into her basic writing classroom, critical pedagogy is clearly guiding her choices and the student-centered focus of the basic writing class she proposes.

Carter contextualizes basic writing courses within the varied and complex construction and situations in which they operate. She examines struggles and accomplishments within a basic writing program and then provides opportunities for basic writing instructors to create a program informed by critical pedagogy and an understanding of multiple types of literacies. Finally, she notes how university faculty often do not value the many literacies that students do have, and therefore fail to create a bridge that may make them more effective instructors. Her approach necessitates a classroom where instructors are flexible and empathetic to the contexts in which they teach.

Carter’s approach to pedagogy allows students to actively engage in literacy as a social and political process, and empowers students to utilize their other literacies to inform their learning of academic literacies. She notes, “A curriculum shaped by a pedagogy of rhetorical dexterity thus asks students to examine the ‘process by which newcomers become part of a community of practice’ as they have experienced it in an out-of-school context and apply that process to the ones required of newcomers in academic communities of practice” (126). Students engaged in Carter’s pedagogy are clearly taking time to reflect and to consider the social implications of the literacies in which they engage. They are actively choosing to engage participate and develop academic literacies, while recognizing the social and political implications of doing so.

The most compelling feature of this book is that while it was grounded in a well-defined theoretical framework, Carter provides many examples using student and faculty experiences. In addition to the strong examples Carter uses to make her theoretical and pedagogical perspectives real in terms of the basic writing classroom, she also offers a series of appendixes with sample
assignments. It is my hope that instructors implementing Carter’s pedagogy of rhetorical dexterity will provide additional sample assignments to the basic writing community that can be used to implement the pedagogy of rhetorical dexterity.

Shannon Carter’s book is well-researched and theoretically-based, but also incorporates touching, funny, and relevant stories at each step along the way. She gives examples of the big picture while also offering practical suggestions for our everyday practice. Ideally, of course, this book would be read by lawmakers, parents, administration, and faculty across the disciplines. Until that happens, this book is a true gem and a wonderful addition to the reading lists of basic writing faculty.