Exploring Instructor Perceptions of and Practices for Public Discourse in First-Year Writing Courses

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A long-standing goal of the university in the Western tradition has been to prepare students to enter into a democratic society as informed citizens, but contemporary practices are often aimed at cultivating individuals for specialized careers rather than preparing them for general civil interactions. As James Berlin reminds us in *Rhetoric and Reality*, the classical rhetors Aristotle, Cicero, Quintilian, and Augustine placed rhetoric at the center of learning and emphasized its fundamental role in maintaining democratic ideals (2). Though the modern academy appears to stray from this principle historical objective, contemporary freshman composition courses (among others) maintain the capacity to do more than "prepare students for the workplace" (Berlin 189). Compositionists often embrace a humanistic perspective, wherein meaning is created in the material practice of writing and the writers themselves and their audiences are impacted throughout the process, giving purpose to the communicative act beyond a purely utilitarian function (Lindemann 3-8). Composing is a cultural act; a text is both influenced by and influences the society in which it is constructed (Farris). The first-year composition classroom offers the unique capacity to function as a mock micro-society in which students may practice participating in civil public discourse in a relatively low-stakes environment, teaching

both writing skills and democratic acts that may then be transferred and applied into the public

sphere (Ervin; Friend; Crisco; Selfe).

A central objective of many writing courses is to prepare students to effectively

communicate in their personal, professional, and public lives, but writing instruction can seem

disconnected from contemporary societal practices that constitute civil public discourse. This

project aims to explore the connections between instructors' perceptions and understanding of

public discourse in relationship to the first-year writing classroom and the manners in which

those views manifest (or do not) in course materials. For this study, public discourse is defined as

any communicative act that takes place in the public sphere and impacts wide demographics.

Public discourse resides in the "community" sphere, and composition courses can provide

opportunities to actively investigate public issues relevant to students and their self-identified

communities (Farkas 38). Ideally, public discourse would aim to be respectful, logical,

participatory, and truthful; it is produced through a variety of modes and media, conventional to

contemporary.

To collect and chronicle the theories of civil public discourse and its role in the

composition classroom, the first-year writing instructors at a regional mid-sized, liberal arts

public university were presented an opportunity to participate in part or all of a three-phased

research process, which included responding to a survey, engaging in an interview, and

submitting course materials for review. The research team hypothesized that instructors would

self-report a belief in public discourse as an important goal of first-year writing but that the

explicit teaching of public discourse would not be evidenced in course materials such as policies,

syllabi, assignments, and teaching philosophies. A qualitative review of our data confirms our hypothesis: while the instructors we spoke with strongly agreed that public discourse should be--and is--an important part of first-year writing courses, the pedagogical materials we reviewed reflected very little practical application of that goal. This discussion poses interesting questions about the ways our values as composition instructors are reflected through our pedagogy to our students' ability to transfer what they have learned in our classrooms to their public contexts.

Literature Review

The desire for informed and civil public discourse is not a phenomenon of contemporary society but, as Kate Ronald argues, is rooted in classical rhetorical pedagogy, which is aimed at helping students navigate between the public and private usage of rhetoric as a mode of "learning, thinking, and acting in the world" (38). Classical rhetorical pedagogy complements public discourse as a pedagogical focus because it encourages teaching individuals to investigate their own culture, give themselves and their audience context in a rhetorical situation, and take personal responsibility for language (38). Grettano extends Ronald's recognition to a connection between private and public spheres, particularly through *ethos*, by calling for composition instructors to go beyond personal musings and help students find "the personal within the public forum" or in communication practices outside of the classroom (46). The author acknowledges that some students were unable to critically consume or construct discourse concerning public events because they had often been conditioned to not question media and struggled with "cognitive dissonance" when existing beliefs and assumptions were challenged (Grettano 80).

Now, we might find students who implicitly *distrust* the media instead based on the sociopolitical cultures they bring to the university with them.

In this classical tradition, the explicit teaching of public discourse could increase democratic practices in the public sphere. Andrea Leskes argues "the academy [should] commit itself strenuously and immediately to improving civil discourse as a tool of democracy...in the next generation of college graduates but also in the public at large" (Leskes 2). In this view, an adoption of civil public discourse moves society toward the reestablishment of foundational principles that characterize a democratic society. Leskes lists the components of civil public discourse: (1) analysis and reasoning, (2) information retrieval and evaluation, (3) effective written communication, (4) effective oral communication that includes listening as well as speaking, (5) an understanding of one's own perspectives and their limitations, and (6) the ability to interact constructively with a diverse group of individuals holding conflicting views (4). Together, information literacy facilitated by composition classrooms promotes these elements and creates more equitable forms of public discourse that allow for plurality and the situating of knowledge among the vested interests of sociopolitical hierarchical structures.

This information-driven depiction of civil public discourse parallels closely with many learning objectives of college composition courses and, as Christine Farris acknowledges, can be traced through composition's history. Composition is intricately tied to rhetoric, yet this relationship seems to be obscured in modern composition classrooms for multiple reasons: the cultural shift from oral to written discourse, the academy's move toward providing specialized professional skills training, and the rise of English Studies, which values the individual more

than the collective (Farris). Farris employs the work of C.H. Knoblauch to argue the value

philosophical and historical rhetoric offer to teachers of writing:

> Rhetorical theory can help composition teacher-researchers locate their statements about
>
> how people compose within a framework of why they compose: what significance the
>
> activity has for their lives and for the life of their society and culture. In other words, it
>
> can help to place writing in a context of human values—self-expression, learning,
>
> reaching out to other people, preserving knowledge, conducting business, making laws,
>
> playing, creating works of art—the psychological, ethical, political, and aesthetic
>
> dimensions of language use that make it so encompassing a human enterprise. (qtd. in
>
> Farris)

Viewing rhetoric and composition's relationship as a cultural practice, rather than only

intellectual knowledge, creates a classroom that is not just a place to police errors and condition

style but a "cross-curricular and extracurricular [site] for the production of discourse" (Farris 5).

Encouraging students to investigate public issues relative to their lives and communities

highlights writing as a social and cultural function rather than as solely an academic

communication practice.

Focusing outside of academia allows composition courses to illustrate the purposes and

functions of public writing practices that exist in the public sphere. First-year writing instructors

can teach students to question public opinion as not necessarily a reflection of truth, illustrating

the value of evidence and reason in discourse. One such obstacle that can muddle truth within the

public sphere is traditional gender roles, as essentialism misconceptualizes notions of public and

private, representing the public as an ideology, which forces women who operate outside the

home to prove that they are qualified in ways that men do not (Griffin 26). According to

Habermas, the public sphere is only quasi-public, as "private people come together as a public"

(27). The public consists of private, independent economic actors who comprise the public

sphere based on their shared participation in civil society (28). For women, the path out of the

private sphere is challenged by long-standing sociopolitical structures, but, as Lazare notes,

women's increasing presence in the public sphere is now a key indicator of the state of human

rights in a nation.

Therefore, public education then becomes vital for teaching members of the public

essential critical thinking and communication skills that empower individuals to consider matters

of both personal and public significance and take informed action, which may enact real change

in the world around them. Indeed, many compositionists believe a primary objective of first-year

writing courses is to cultivate informed citizens that contribute to society in productive ways. To

achieve such a goal, Brian Gogan encourages instructors to avoid representing school and society

as two completely separate entities (543-544). Classroom experiences can provide a foundational

understanding of how discourse among private members of a civil society gather in spaces to

discuss issues of public concern. Elizabeth Ervin addresses the critical role professors play in

modeling how intellectuals and engaged citizens behave, but involvement does not *just* happen;

it requires structured opportunities for students to practice participating in public discourse (384).

Ervin facilitates activities that model active civic engagement beyond the first-year writing

classroom, like writing letters to the editor (393). By producing bias-free writing for an authentic

audience, Ervin claims students could simultaneously practice college writing tasks and ethical methods of public discourse.

Instructors might promote writing that centers on public issues by encouraging students to authentically discuss topics relative to their lives and communities by viewing the classroom as a "social [space] where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power" (Pratt 501). The classroom instructor functions as a mediator, facilitating civil and productive discourse among members of the class. Diverse participants that engage in civil public discourse enhance and shape the public sphere by making it more impartial and inclusive (Friend 670).

As a complement to the "real" spaces of the classroom and public issues, Howard Rheingold and Cynthia Selfe also offer digital spaces and new media as effective contemporary tools for instructors to utilize in preparing students for and provoking interest in engagement in public discourse. Rheingold cites a national poll that claims 70% of 12-24-year-olds believe in the importance of helping the community, and 82% described themselves as somewhat involved in social causes, signifying that the interest in active citizenship pre-exists pedagogical practices (Rheingold 97-98). Given the prevalence of social media sites and the recent political climate, the investment in social and political issues is extremely high. That is not, however, to say that composition instructors should leave students to their own (technological) devices. Selfe also calls for instructors to pay attention and get involved in shaping technology and literacy. She asserts that students need to be able to do more than just use computers: "they must also have the ability to understand, form a critical perspective, the social and cultural contexts for on-line

discourse and communication... [because] they have become essential parts of our cultural understanding of what it means to be literate" (24). Instructors may harness their students' attentions and guide them to be active and effective creators and consumers of culture in viewing classrooms as publics, implementing Participatory Pedagogy (as defined by Rheingold), and promoting online digital spaces.

Both Rheingold and Selfe rightfully question if the conventional conceptions of civic engagement ignore, devalue, and marginalize students' contemporary modes and manners of collective communication (98). The academy's prevailing privilege of print coupled with the digital disconnect of modern communication practices and composition classroom instruction often ostracize students and silence their voices. The phenomenon is not simply a shift in materials, like new technology, but a change in how modern culture operates. Participatory media, or "social media whose value and power derives from the active participation of many people," is a uniquely twenty-first century practice of democracy in which students can challenge existing socioeconomic and political hierarchies in the contested mediasphere (Rheingold 100). Yet, as Selfe points out, the linking of technology with the ability to more fully participate in culture excludes those without access to it in a way that exacerbates inequalities rather than reduce them (Selfe 7). Public digital platforms, like blogging, can have liberating and empowering effects on students, largely because of their accessibility and immediacy in providing a space for their voices to create substantial social change, if students have access. If they do not, however, the exclusionary nature of the public reasserts itself. Therefore, students'

abilities to participate in public discourse is mediated by the spaces in which they can compose

and their technological literacy (7).

Writing, as demonstrated by Selfe and others, transcends the boundaries of academic and

civic spheres and, additionally, professional life (Selfe 137; Ervin 385; Crisco 18). Crisco

advocates that writing instruction should prioritize the creation of a literate disposition, a value

system that invokes students to develop and utilize their composition practices for civic

rhetorical purposes (Crisco 19). Literate disposition values professional, academic— and most

importantly— civic participation, which can be achieved through activist literacy or "reading and

writing events that emerge from democratic dispositions and rhetorical purposes for civic

engagement" (18). Instructors may implement a balance of academic and "real world" writing

assignments, like a community development proposal or public address, to ensure students can

make informed rhetorical decisions in multiple contexts. Furthermore, Crisco affirms students

can engage through exploratory reading and writing on public issues, opposing the current-

traditional model in which topic selection and thesis development occur before drafting. Thus,

Crisco's fusion between activism and literacy demonstrates both the ability to persuade through

argumentation and to cultivate an understanding of evidence acquisition.

Crisco's activist literacy is well complemented by Public-Sphere Pedagogy, a

collaborative composition instructional approach that prioritizes developing "student[s] well-

being through purpose-driven dialogue and democratic participation" (Swiencicki et al. 40). To

achieve this ideal, Swiencicki et al. implemented a Town Hall Meeting as part of California State

University-Chico's first-year writing course curriculum, which allows students to share their

research concerning pressing public issues in the local community, state, nation, and international levels (40). The authors argue that these meetings provide a safe space for students to present their findings and opinions, having their voices heard while listening to other student and faculty researchers. Town halls illustrate that college educations can have more purpose than teaching specialized skills for job positions; universities are the foundation for educating informed, literate citizens who will leave the academy to participate in multiple communities and, ideally, for the public good. With the rise of "fake news" and an unstable political climate, students' critical engagement with rhetoric in required first-year writing courses could help recreate a civil public discourse. Students should be able to utilize rhetoric as a way of knowing, navigating ethos to participate in a civil public discourse by emphasizing information literacy and reasoned argumentation.

Methodology

For this study, the researchers chose to focus on participants who were first-year writing instructors at a regional, mid-sized, liberal arts, public university in Appalachia. This research project took on a three-tiered approach to collecting information from individuals through (phase 1) paper surveys, (phase 2) in-person interviews, and (phase 3) an analysis of course materials (anonymous artifacts). Of approximately 50 surveys distributed, 10 were completed and submitted to our team for review, and the results of those ten surveys closely mirrored our original hypotheses. Given that the number of responses was lower than expected, we interpreted the data holistically, focusing more on the relationships between the three stages rather than their

individual parts. Survey data with those numbers cannot be statistically significant considered quantitatively; however, if we look at the qualitative whole and use the surveys and artifacts as pieces with which to compare what participants have shared with us in interviews (of which there were five), the qualitative analysis of our data becomes richer and more meaningful.
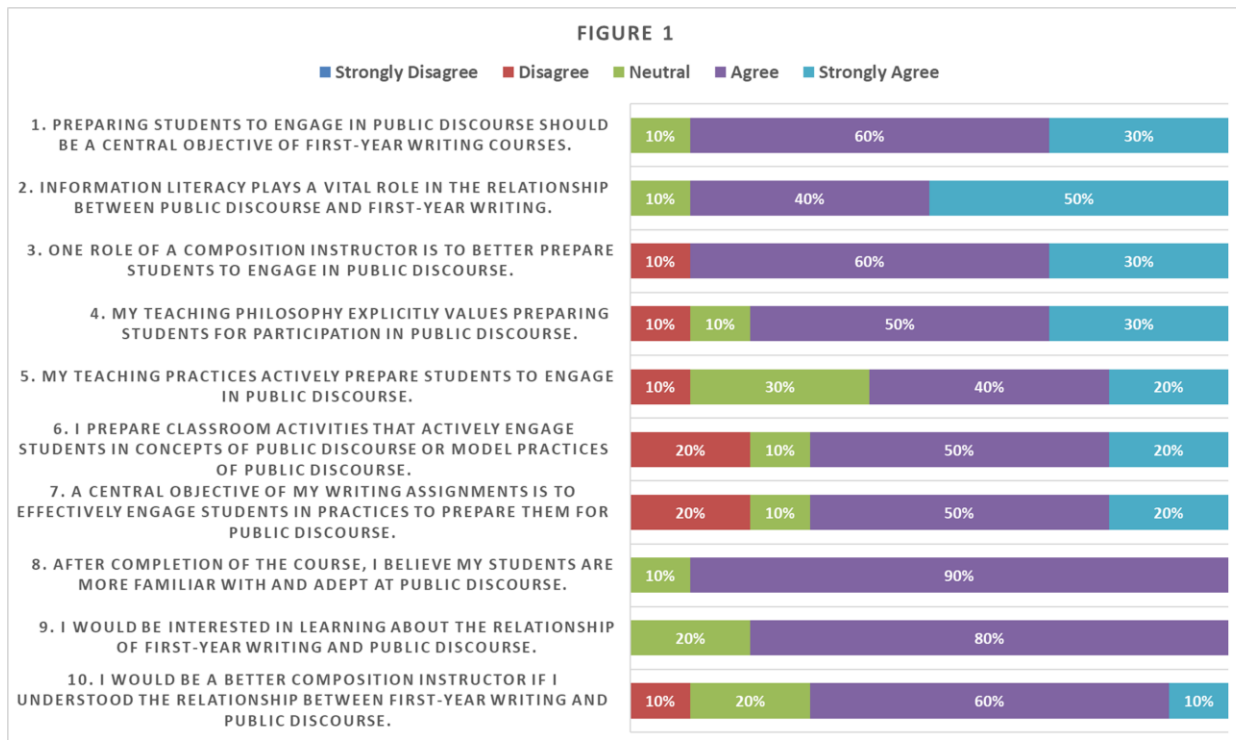
Phase I: Surveys

Phase I focused on distributing paper surveys that asked the participants to describe the influence of public discourse on their teaching practices in assignments (both high and low stakes) and classroom activities (See Appendix A). The research team choose to use surveys as the first round of research because they are low-stakes, anonymous, and take little time to complete. Printed surveys were distributed to participants by placing them in each instructor's department mailbox and were returned anonymously upon completion. In the hopes that participants would be more compelled to continue in the study after engaging with the topic, instructors were invited to volunteer for an interview and/or submit course materials at the end of the survey.

The coding system used to aggregate the data from the surveys allowed researchers to easily compare the instructors viewpoints. This sequence included a numbering system for the Likert-scale on the survey. The structure of the scale was as follows: Strongly Disagree received a -5, Disagree received a -3, Neutral received a 0, Agree received a 3, and Strongly Agree received a 5. The researchers chose this system, as opposed to the traditional number coding

system of 1-5, because the responses included both positive and negative answers. Implementing

a negative scale amplified the drastic contrasts in the responses received.

Results

Answers for this part of our three-part analysis closely align with ideas and conclusions

found in outside sources whether dealing with the "civic engagement" of students' thoughtful

responses (Crisco 18) and the drive for instructors demonstrating public discourse through

activist literacy, or creating a "mediasphere" in which students embody a participatory culture

within and outside the classroom (Rheingold 100). Therefore, the information found through this

part of the bigger study serves to support two important aspects of our hypothesis: (1) There

were very few negative (strongly disagree or disagree) answers for each statement, and (2) there

was a clear difference between the answers to the general statements about teaching practices

(statements 1-3; Figure 2) and the more specific statements regarding personal teaching

preferences and philosophy (statements 4-8; Figure 3). For this study, statements within the

surveys will be referred to as S coupled with the number in which the statement appears (S1

represents the first statement on the survey; S2 is the second statement, and so on).

FIGURE 1

Legend: ■ Strongly Disagree ■ Disagree ■ Neutral ■ Agree ■ Strongly Agree

1. PREPARING STUDENTS TO ENGAGE IN PUBLIC DISCOURSE SHOULD BE A CENTRAL OBJECTIVE OF FIRST-YEAR WRITING COURSES. — Neutral 10%, Agree 60%, Strongly Agree 30%

2. INFORMATION LITERACY PLAYS A VITAL ROLE IN THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PUBLIC DISCOURSE AND FIRST-YEAR WRITING. — Neutral 10%, Agree 40%, Strongly Agree 50%

3. ONE ROLE OF A COMPOSITION INSTRUCTOR IS TO BETTER PREPARE STUDENTS TO ENGAGE IN PUBLIC DISCOURSE. — Neutral 10%, Agree 60%, Strongly Agree 30%

4. MY TEACHING PHILOSOPHY EXPLICITLY VALUES PREPARING STUDENTS FOR PARTICIPATION IN PUBLIC DISCOURSE. — Disagree 10%, Neutral 10%, Agree 50%, Strongly Agree 30%

5. MY TEACHING PRACTICES ACTIVELY PREPARE STUDENTS TO ENGAGE IN PUBLIC DISCOURSE. — Disagree 10%, Neutral 30%, Agree 40%, Strongly Agree 20%

6. I PREPARE CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES THAT ACTIVELY ENGAGE STUDENTS IN CONCEPTS OF PUBLIC DISCOURSE OR MODEL PRACTICES OF PUBLIC DISCOURSE. — Disagree 20%, Neutral 10%, Agree 50%, Strongly Agree 20%

7. A CENTRAL OBJECTIVE OF MY WRITING ASSIGNMENTS IS TO EFFECTIVELY ENGAGE STUDENTS IN PRACTICES TO PREPARE THEM FOR PUBLIC DISCOURSE. — Disagree 20%, Neutral 10%, Agree 50%, Strongly Agree 20%

8. AFTER COMPLETION OF THE COURSE, I BELIEVE MY STUDENTS ARE MORE FAMILIAR WITH AND ADEPT AT PUBLIC DISCOURSE. — Neutral 10%, Agree 90%

9. I WOULD BE INTERESTED IN LEARNING ABOUT THE RELATIONSHIP OF FIRST-YEAR WRITING AND PUBLIC DISCOURSE. — Neutral 20%, Agree 80%

10. I WOULD BE A BETTER COMPOSITION INSTRUCTOR IF I UNDERSTOOD THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN FIRST-YEAR WRITING AND PUBLIC DISCOURSE. — Disagree 10%, Neutral 20%, Agree 60%, Strongly Agree 10%
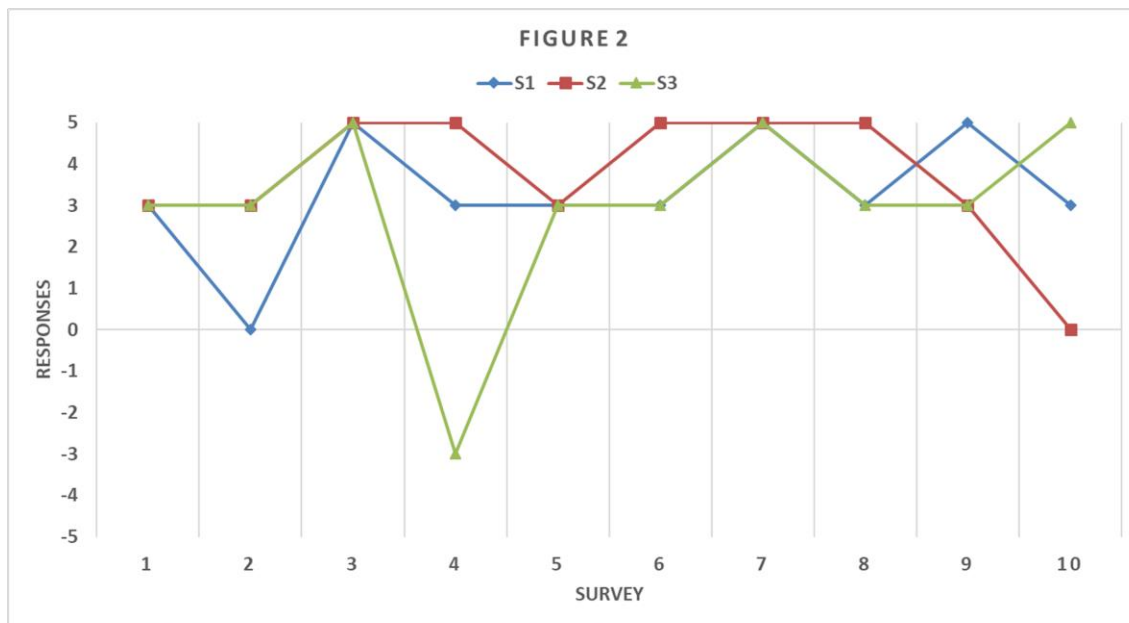
Figure 1: This stacked bar graph shows the average of participant responses to each survey question.

General Statements

As indicated in Figure 1, the majority (60%) of respondents agreed with the statement "Preparing students to engage in public discourse should be a central objective of first-year writing courses" (S1). Another 30% strongly agreed with the statement, and the remaining 10% gave a neutral response. In short, 90% of the respondents agreed that preparing students to engage in public discourse should be a central objective of first-year writing courses.

S2's responses were quite similar to S1's, with one important delineation. A consensus on S2 (90% of responses) shows that respondents believed that information literacy plays a vital role in the relationship between public discourse and first-year writing. Of that 90%, 50%

strongly agreed with the statement as opposed to the 40% who chose that they agree. When

comparing the figures from S1 and S2, the data suggest that respondents had strong beliefs about

the relationship between information literacy and the first-year writing classroom.
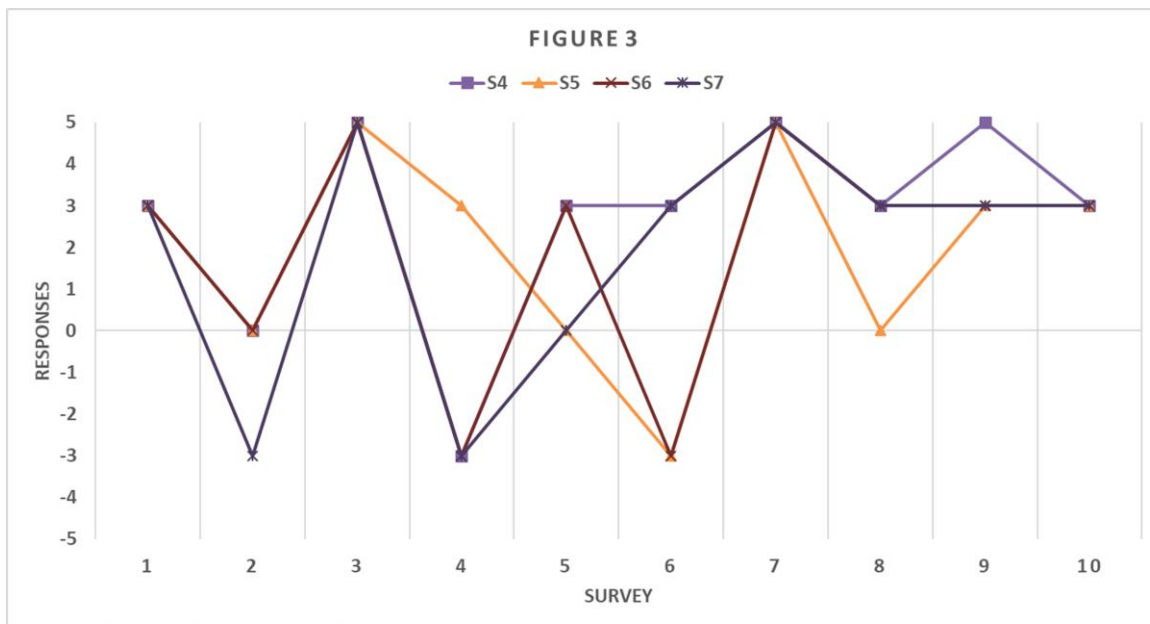

Figure 2: This line chart displays the relationship between the general statements of the survey (S1-S3).

S3, the final general statement, yielded results similar to S1 and S2 with one significant

difference. While the respondents generally agreed (90%) with the statement that one role of a

composition instructor is to better prepare students to engage in public discourse, one respondent

answered this statement with a negative response, "disagree."

The responses to S1-S3 show that the instructors agreed with statements about general

teaching practices that relate to public discourse. There is not a significant difference between

the answers to the three statements, which suggests that the respondents agreed that teaching

public discourse and information literacy are important objectives within the first-year writing

community. However, agreement between responses was not as prevalent with the specific

statements in the remainder of the survey.

Figure 3: This line chart displays the relationship between the specific statements of the survey (S4-S7).

Specific Statements

S4-S7, the specific statements about the teaching styles of the individual instructor,

follow a similar trend to the general statements. Figure 3 demonstrates the diversity of responses

coming from respondents about specific aspects of their pedagogical relationship to civil

discourse. Importantly, the specific statement responses were significantly more negative than

responses to the general statements. The fact that there were more negative answers is not

surprising and parallels our original hypothesis that while instructors believe public discourse is

an important element of composition, they often do not explicitly include it in their classroom

materials and activities.

Although S8-S10 were specific teaching philosophy questions, they shared a similar

tendency with the general statements (S1-S3). A large majority of the respondents agreed with

the statements (90% for S8, 80% for S9, 60% for S10), and the other respondents were neutral,

except for S10 where one respondent disagreed with the statement "I would be a better

composition instructor if I understood the relationship between first-year writing and public

discourse." But, much like S3, the instance of disagreement should not diminish the mostly

positive responses to the statement.

Phase II: Interviews

The second phase, the interview process, permitted the researchers to collect more

specific, in-depth information about the participants' teaching beliefs and practices as they apply

to civil public discourse. Because of low survey response rate, the interviews became our main

focus for understanding instructors' opinions as they relate to the other data we gathered. Upon

review of the surveys, the research team contacted the five instructors who volunteered for

interviews: two were tenured faculty, two were on the tenure track but not yet tenured, and one is

full-time non-tenure track faculty. Four different members of the research team made

arrangements with these faculty members to meet with them for a one-on-one interview (See

Appendix B for interview questions). Identifiable data was not collected as a part of the

interview process to protect the instructors' identities.

Results

Of the five interviews, three instructors discussed the importance of public discourse in the first-year writing classroom. For instance, Instructor E commented, "What we are doing at the university level, even at first-year writing, is generating new knowledge, so if the goal is to generate new knowledge, we must share it." Similarly, Instructor A believes public discourse should "align with the mission of almost any university… we're preparing them to be good citizens and [being] good citizens, currently, in this country, means participating in the democratic process and…. being able to reason logically and to be able to disagree respectfully and know how to evaluate sources." Instructor D maintains that if public discourse was not specifically taught in the first-year writing classroom, many students would not have the ability or desire to communicate outside of their "speciality areas." For these instructors, teaching students to be informed citizens who are able to traverse many fields of opinion with evidence is a central goal of public discourse in the first-year writing classroom and also hearkens back to the aims for information literacy awareness (Swiencicki et al.). Allowing students to experience information literacy in a democratic, discussion-oriented manner creates opportunities for them to explore possible selves fashioned around "ideas of citizenship, staying informed, engaging in public issues-oriented dialogues" (Swiencicki et al. 45). Grounding public discourse in the frame of literacy awareness also establishes responsibilities for the classroom such as equipping students with tools to explore source integration, academic voice, and audience awareness.

Although most instructors inherently valued "public discourse" as a broad concept, the instructors interviewed often struggled to define public discourse. Two professors (B and D)

formulated similar definitions: public discourse is language used in the public, for the public, and that impacts the public. Instructor E hesitated to define public discourse due to a perceived connection to mass media and journalism but concluded, "public discourse is something engaging where a community of scholars interact with each other and outside [the classroom] in order to establish who's the audience, listeners, or the ones the program/research is for." While the instructors varied on specific definitions, all instructors suggested that audience awareness is a main component of public discourse.

Many of the instructors referred to the university's specific student learning outcomes for the various first-year writing courses; however, no consensus on which courses were most conducive to practicing public discourse emerged. Instructor C maintained that public discourse is more relevant to the university's developmental reading-intensive course and ENG 101, which focuses on the critical reading of texts such as essays, than to ENG 102, which focuses on research processes, because the research aspects of 102 cater more towards academic discourse. However, Instructor B disagreed, claiming that the information literacy and audience awareness skills discussed in 102 are easily transferable to the public arena. Instructor B was not the only instructor to draw direct connection between public discourse and information literacy; several instructors agreed that civil public discussion should be well-informed. Civil public discussion and "democratic dialogue" are linked in instructors' minds as we consider how relationships formed in the classroom and outside of it are meant to mirror one another in order to diversify student voice in many spheres of discourse (Hemmings 69-70). Exploration of these forms of

discourse are dependent on well-informed speakers, which the interviewed instructors corroborate.

When asked about the relationship between public discourse and information literacy, Instructor E made an important distinction: "Public discourse is not informed with information literacy but instead emotion and opinion; where public discourse needs evidence and information to back it up is when it becomes information literacy." Instructor A discussed topic selection and the research paper, observing that "sometimes there is some overlap [with participating in public discourse] based on the topics [students] choose, but that doesn't always happen." Similarly, Instructors D and E cited informed topic selection as a vital part of participating in both academic and public discourses. Instructor D further discusses source selection in consideration of audience, and, finally, Instructor C encourages students to question and be skeptical of everything they read. The instructors clearly distinguish between public opinion and information literacy, maintaining that public discourse must have evidence-based argumentation.

Although instructors see a clear relationship between public discourse and first-year writing, its instruction is often implicit. Instructor C admitted that, despite teaching for 25 years, public discourse has not been a focal point in the classroom. Instructor A pointed out that other goals of the first-year writing classroom often overlap with the goals of public discourse. Instructors implicitly integrate public discourse by integrating readings on topics important to the general public (Instructor B), helping students visualize and write to authentic audiences (Instructor D), encouraging students to connect topics in class to examples from social media (Instructor C), and asking students to write in more public media like YouTube videos

(Instructor D). Finally, two instructors (B and D) describe their classrooms as a micro-public. The classroom offers a lower-stakes, somewhat authentic public sphere that can prepare students for the larger, higher stakes publics outside of the university. Although the classroom becomes its own community, it is still situated in academic discourse, according to Instructor B.

Phase III: Course Materials

Finally, the research team analyzed course materials submitted by instructors to determine if public discourse was explicitly integrated into their first-year writing courses. Upon request, the same five instructors who agreed to be interviewed also agreed to provide artifacts from their classroom(s) to review for evidence of explicit instruction in public discourse or engagement with public discourse related topics. These artifacts were anonymized and separated into three categories: (1) policies and syllabi, (2) assignments, and (3) activities/other. We received 13 policies and daily syllabi (which we counted as separate documents), 10 assignment descriptions, and 10 documents labeled as "Other," including peer review worksheets, the programmatic grading rubric, teaching philosophies, and prewriting activities, for a total of 33 documents that shed light on how these instructors facilitate student interactions with public discourse through a variety of functions in their courses. The research team examined the artifacts and recorded any evidence of public discourse being explicitly presented to students.

Results

Within those 33 documents, only twelve individual instances of explicit references to public discourse or the values of public discourse espoused in our definition existed. Of these

twelve instances, however, not a single explicit statement to students that they would be discussing public discourse (or any synonym), preparing students for public discourse, or that the instructor valued public discourse in the course was found. Instead, all occurrences found exhibited clear public discourse-related activities. For example, one assignment asks students to "be as specific as [they] can when identifying [audience] (e.g. the members of the [city name redacted] City Council….)," encouraging students to consider an audience that is most appropriately described as "public." Similarly, another artifact for a pre-writing activity emphasizes that "The topic needs to be one that is ongoing or timely (something that people continue to discuss and/or that has a strong connection to current events and concerns)." Again, while not explicitly encouraging students to think of themselves as involved in public discourse, the language connects the rhetorical activity in which students participate to the public domain of current events. Most identified examples promote an increase in rhetorical awareness specifically focused on audience and encouraging students to see that audience as a contemporary, real, thinking public.

Discussion

When beginning this project, we hypothesized that instructors would self-report a belief in civil public discourse as an important aim of first-year writing but little evidence of public discourse as explicitly taught through course materials would exist. Although the number of respondents was lower than expected, the survey results confirmed the first part of the hypothesis: the instructors who responded hold a belief that public discourse is an important aim

of first-year writing. In addition, the variance of instructor responses to the general statements and specific statements confirms the remainder of the hypothesis: public discourse is not often represented in classrooms through the material artifacts for the classroom. Even with examples of civil public discourse-adjacent activities (which were counted) and course materials that increased transferable skills for public discourse (which were not counted), the lack of explicit reference to public discourse within the artifacts further supports the original hypothesis through a holistic, integrated view of data.

An incidental, yet striking, implication from the interviews derived from instructors questioning the nature of public discourse. Most instructors asked for clarification on the definition of public discourse as defined within this project and its parallels to other notions of public discourse. A recurring concern was an often-implied connotation of public discourse being restricted to political commentary. For example, Instructor A inquired if non-political communicative acts are possible. The theoretical nature of this inquiry is beyond the scope of this paper, but such questions acknowledge the importance of each instructor's worldview and pedagogical grounding. Defining what is and is not political would be determined by each individual. Instructors who embrace a feminist pedagogical philosophy, for example, will deny a division of public and private. Therefore, for these instructors, participation in any discourse community is participation in public discourse. If a first-year writing program is going to make preparing students to participate in public discourse a student learning outcome, it will likely need to explicitly define public discourse for the purpose of the program.

The discrepancy among views surrounding public discourse potentially contributes to many instructors thinking that public discourse *is* taught in first-year writing courses. For example, Instructors A and E maintain that teaching information literacy prepares students for public discourse because those skill-sets educate students about ethical journalism and research, which they believe to be imperative to creating civil-public discourse. Similarly, Instructor B believes that teaching critical reading is imperative to being able to understand and participate in the debates of civil-public discourse. Instructors also readily specify the difference in teaching practices between explicit writing tasks and implicit outcomes, which seems to be where public discourse has been relegated.

Indeed, the difference between learning outcomes being implicit or explicit in a classroom is of central importance here. Research from Bugdal and Holtz; Carillo; Haas and Flower; and Horning and Kraemer show that students--particularly first-year students--*need* explicit instruction in textual meaning-making and in synthesizing information for their own arguments. Information literacy research in post-secondary education also supports that explicit pedagogical strategies are most effective (Braunger qtd. in Schoenbach, Greenleaf, and Murphy 14; Pugh et al.). In addition, we propose that this critical distinction between implicit and explicit instruction can be correlated with the structures in which an instructor works: i.e., if a program does not explicitly shape its materials--sample syllabi, professional development, textbook choices, etc.--around public discourse, will instructors have the support and motivation to build those materials for their classrooms themselves? This parallel discussion poses the question of whether, if we know that explicit instruction yields greater learning results in our classrooms,

more explicit and clear programmatic guidelines can yield similar teaching and learning

successes as they move through individual course materials. Our interpretation of our data places

the stakes for our research squarely here: that which we value and that which we want students to

value in our courses should be made explicit and should be easily identifiable at all levels of

course structure from programmatic structure to individual course materials to the students.

Conclusion

The exploratory nature of this research raises as many questions as answers, providing

exciting opportunities for future research. Although this research contains a small sample size

from one university, the study is easily replicable for a variety of institutions. The materials used

to collect data (survey and interview questions) are appendicized and available for readers to use

and revise as they see fit for their own research purposes. Additionally, future research could

attempt to differentiate variables affecting the motivations for the disconnect between instructor

opinion and course materials. Finally, this research raises questions about other topics instructors

might find important but do not explicitly address in their classrooms. Readers may also reflect

on their own teaching practices for explicit and implicit outcomes regarding public discourse or

otherwise. In other words, am I visibly and explicitly making clear for my students the goals of

this course? Moreover, have I even reflected on that enough myself to be able to articulate those

goals for myself and in course materials?

While the original intent of this study was to examine the nature of public discourse in

the first-year writing classroom, several other implications and questions surfaced while

analyzing the data. Participants clearly displayed a belief in the importance of public discourse, but these beliefs were not necessarily reflected in their materials. While this study is not designed to identify the variables affecting the findings, the research team hypothesizes this disconnect between belief and material representations of that course follow three main veins: (1) instructors feel constrained by programmatic or university-driven student learning outcomes, (2) instructors find it cumbersome to include explicit public discourse when covering the many other content areas required in such courses, and (3) instructors believe public discourse is implicit in their instruction and that explicit inclusion is unnecessary.

With first-year writing instructors already being charged with teaching students a number of new skills, public discourse can seem overwhelming to add to that list. However, instructors can look to established frameworks like participatory pedagogy and activist literacy to situate students' composition work within cultural contexts (Rheingold; Crisco). In order to transfer these skills, students require explicit, structured opportunities to practice participating in public discourse with real audiences, which provides more value to writing and to the course in general (Ervin; Knoblauch). Allowing students to practice public discourse skills within the safety of the classroom empowers them to transfer these skills into other realms.

Despite a relatively small sample size, the data we collected are intriguing; they suggest that teaching students to participate in civil public discourse can be an important goal of first-year writing courses and a fundamental role of composition instructors. However, though instructors frequently expressed their value for teaching skills and practices that prepare students to engage in forms of public discourse, their course materials did not directly reflect that belief.

Therefore, this study suggests that first-year writing instructors view academic discourse (rather than public discourse) as the primary objective of their classes, and students are rarely prompted to engage in reasoned argumentation that explicitly parallels common forms of civil public discourse such as online forums or town halls. Yet, educators maintain that students can transfer course-taught skills into other modes and communities that permeate modern society. Exciting possibilities exist to further explore the relationship between civil public discourse and freshman composition courses, and, perhaps, establish a connection between explicit instruction and civil action by asking similar questions in other programs. Rhetoric's historical role in cultivating informed, ethical citizens still holds significance in the contemporary composition classroom, and, by asking difficult questions about whether our course pedagogy reflects our course goals, we could focus first-year writing course instruction toward engaging in diverse forms of civil public discourse beyond the academy and contribute to the continuation of a functional democratic society.

Appendix 1: Survey

Please place an ✗ or a ✓ in the appropriate box.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. Preparing students to engage in public discourse should be a central objective of first-year writing courses.					
2. Information literacy plays a vital role in the relationship between public discourse and first-year writing.					
3. One role of a first-year writing instructor is to better prepare students to engage in public discourse.					
4. My teaching philosophy explicitly values preparing students to participation in public discourse.					
5. My teaching practices actively prepare students to engage in public discourse.					

6. I prepare classroom activities that actively engage students in concepts of public discourse or model practices of public discourse.					
7. A central objective of my writing assignments is to effectively engage students in practices to prepare them for public discourse.					
8. I believe my students are more familiar with and adept at public discourse after completing my first-year writing course.					
9. I would be interested in learning about the relationship between first-year writing and public discourse.					
10. I would be a better composition instructor if I understood the relationship between first-year writing and public discourse.					

11. Would you be willing to be contacted for an interview concerning the role of public discourse in first-year writing?

Yes   No

12. Would you be willing to provide artifacts from <u>previous FYW courses</u> (syllabi, writing prompts, handouts etc.) to be anonymously analyzed as part of our research?

Yes   No

If you answered yes to question 11 OR 12, please provide your name and email

Appendix 2: Interview Questions

1. Do you think public discourse is or should be a primary objective of first-year writing courses?

2. How would you describe the relationship between student participation in public discourse and FYW?

3. We have defined public discourse as any communicative act that takes place in the public sphere and is about issues that impact wide demographics. Ideally, public discourse would aim to be civil, respectful, logical, participatory, and truthful. How do you define public discourse, or what would you modify about our definition?

4. How do you understand the relationship between public discourse and information literacy?

5. Should first-year writing pedagogy engage students in public discourse or prepare them to engage in public discourse? Why or why not?

6. Does public discourse play a role in your teaching philosophy (explicitly or implicitly)?

7. What types of activities or assignments would best engage first year writers in learning how to participate in public discourse and/or promote information literacy?

8. Do you incorporate those into your first-year writing class? If not, why not? If so, in what ways?

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