

Carter, Shannon. *The Way Literacy Lives: Rhetorical Dexterity and Basic Writing Instruction*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2008. (ISBN: 9780791473550)

Reviewed by Alice Horning

Shannon Carter's book is the by-product of her work with basic writers at Texas A & M University–Commerce and of her experience as a teacher in Texas public schools. The goal of this book is to offer a curriculum to challenge the “autonomous model” of literacy as advanced by Brian Street. This model is especially clear in the use of standardized testing of various kinds to measure literacy. Carter says in the opening chapter that her primary objective is “to offer a model for basic writing instruction that is responsive to multiple agents limiting and shaping the means and goals of literacy education, agents with goals that are quite often in opposition” (2). She offers this model in the context of the program in which she works in Texas; the situation in the state of Texas has features in common with many other states due to its use of state-wide standardized tests in response to the No Child Left Behind legislation. Carter is fully familiar with state testing because of her three years' experience as a public high school teacher in Texas. She is appropriately critical of writing tests that entail students answering multiple-choice questions and providing a single timed writing sample. The testing approach in Texas extends from the public schools to public colleges and universities, where the need for remediation is also determined by a state test. Carter also wants to look beyond school writing to the writing people actually do in their lives outside of school.

To help students use what they already know in other areas to develop the ability to use “the language of the academy” (14), Carter's goal is to teach students using what she defines as a,

pedagogy of ‘rhetorical dexterity’—that 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)

She suggests that basic writers can use alternative literacies to learn and develop skills in academic writing for college.

Three theoretical sources provide the basis for the discussion: Carter draws first on New Literacy Studies from the work of the New London Group including Gee and Street. The second theoretical base for her discussion is Activity Theory as defined and proposed by David Russell as the analysis of “human behavior and consciousness in terms of *activity systems*: goal-directed, historically situated, cooperative human interactions . . .” (qtd. in Carter 19). The third theoretical base for rhetorical dexterity is critical literacy, with its emphasis on the social aspects of literacy. This view entails understanding how people interact with the world through literacy.

The book hinges on the notion of a “community of practice,” an idea from Activity Theory. Such a community may consist of people who have skills or abilities in a particular area, with the goal of understanding what those skills are and when they are or are not used appropriately. Students are “literate” in various “communities of practice” (i.e., groups that are identified by how they use written language to think, talk, act and engage in a variety of activities). Carter argues that these literacies can be used as a base for developing others, such as academic critical literacy. While such communities have written language as their shared focus, in the actual descriptions and examples used all through the text, the role of written language is not so clearly an identifying characteristic of a particular community.

These opening goals set a clear agenda for the discussion that follows. The overall idea of helping basic writers (and really, all students) develop an ability to transfer skills from one area to another is a good one. One concern, at the outset, has to do with the definitions of controversial terms like “literacy” as well as the phrase “community practice,” as noted previously. As with other

controversial definitions, turning to the dictionary can be helpful as a basic source. In this case, the dictionary definitions from both the *Random House Unabridged* and the *OED* reveal two senses of literacy as commonly used. Literacy can refer specifically to the ability to read and write or more generally to being educated or having knowledge or skill in a particular area. Carter generally uses literacy in the latter sense, as many people do when they mean skill: computer literacy, musical literacy and so forth. The argument here would be stronger if Carter had taken up the matter of definition explicitly at the outset and clarified the meaning she is using. It isn't until Chapter 6 that this key distinction between literacy as reading and writing ability rather than literacy as "expertise" is formally acknowledged.

Chapter 2 explores the autonomous model of literacy and its flaws. The discussion of the autonomous model draws on the critiques by Brian Street, Linda Adler-Kassner, Susanmarie Harrington and other scholars. According to Carter, it proposes that literacy is a distinct skill that is the key to many other abilities needed for success in school and in life, which, once acquired, can be used in many different contexts. Carter uses Activity Theory to critique this model of literacy, demonstrating how it interferes with basic writers' intellectual development. She cites several examples of people who are "literate" in specific areas (again, here in the sense of skilled) and not in others, such as an electrical lineman who relies on other workers to read written orders and an academic who cannot understand benefits literature from the university where she works. Too often people are labeled or stigmatized as "illiterate," especially by standardized testing, due to the pervasive autonomous model of literacy. Carter ends the chapter with several insightful quotes from basic writing students who see that literacy as defined in the autonomous model limits their opportunities and options.

Chapter 3 examines critical literacy and its role in basic writing research and practice, along with the ways it can "liberate" those who are "oppressed" by the autonomous model of literacy (23). In the first half of this chapter, Carter sets out her curriculum

designed to help students define literacy for themselves. They are then asked to explore and write about their literacy “sponsors” using Brandt’s concept. The later parts of the course engage students in a study of literacy in a social context through a reading of Orwell’s *1984* and viewing the Academy Award-winning Brazilian film *Central Station*. As a reader and teacher of basic writers, I was intrigued by this pedagogical approach and viewed the film after reading the chapter. Carter’s discussion suggests that the film really focuses on a literacy issue. In fact, the scribe in the train station, who writes letters for those who cannot, is simply doing her job; the relationship that develops in the film has little to do with this launch point. Literacy activities play a much more minor role than Carter’s discussion implies.

The latter half of the chapter probes the concept of critical consciousness through discussion of the work of such scholars as Durst, Bizzell and Brandt. These writers’ views support Carter’s claim that helping students develop literacy requires a “*situated perspective*” (59). This requirement entails not only understanding and acknowledging the higher societal value of academic literacy but also accepting and building on the students’ vernacular literacies in a variety of situations and activities.

Chapter 4 is the first of three that proposes a new curricular approach to basic writing by probing the inequity of various views of literacy. This chapter draws on the experiences of Carter’s brother Eric, who is highly literate in such areas as video games, electronic music and computers (68). Using the work of sociolinguist James Paul Gee, Carter discusses Eric’s experiences in and out of school as a kind of case study of rhetorical dexterity and the concept of literacy in varied communities of practice. Eric is an exemplar of these concepts, as Carter makes clear:

The ultimate goal of rhetorical dexterity is to develop the abilities 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. (80)

Eric surely meets this goal though not in the conventional academic sense of literacy. Here again, the matter of definition is pertinent: Eric is skilled in certain areas, but he is not literate in the reading/writing/academic sense. The presentation of Eric's case provides Carter with a springboard to discuss Brandt's *Literacy in American Lives* as a study of the inequity in the availability of literacy to those who may want it. In summarizing several of Brandt's case histories and drawing on the work of other scholars, Carter provides additional evidence for rhetorical dexterity in several case histories drawn from her own work.

Carter's discussion of Brandt's work is somewhat problematic. Brandt would agree that there are key inequities in the availability of literacy education around the country and among her subjects discussed in the book. However, the presentation of some cases from *Literacy in American Lives* is quite limited and difficult to follow if the reader is not already fully familiar with the text. It would have been useful to have at least a brief summary of Brandt's methodology and a broader overview of her findings to provide a fuller context in which the specific cases mentioned could be understood.

The fifth chapter is the second of those that contribute to a new curriculum for basic writing, taking up the alternative literacies offered by different communities of practice. This chapter opens with a discussion of the philosophical background and definitions of literacy and moves from these matters to the proposed curriculum intended to help students develop rhetorical dexterity. Literacy always arises in a specific context with specific people, so that who is defining literacy is always an issue. Literacy may be defined or described by some people as conceptual content or as a skill, with an academic base or with a broader base. This nod to the matter of definition would have strengthened the argument had it appeared earlier in the text.

Carter presents the work of Friere, Gee, Hirsch, Geisler and others as she considers the philosophical matters and problems of definition. She fairly points out that basic writers are often thought to "have no experiences relevant to the general academic

communities of practice in which they are attempting to gain membership” (108). However, marshalling the work of Bartholomae and Petrosky, Carter suggests that basic writers should be considered knowledgeable about some communities of practice that can be of use; they can use this knowledge to build rhetorical dexterity in other communities of practice, especially the academic community. Drawing on the work of Bizzell, Carter argues that basic writers can build their knowledge successfully in this way. Various basic writing scholars and teachers have proposed an array of approaches to achieve this goal, including Kutz, Groden and Zamel, Soliday, Hindman, and Marinara (118-24). While these all appear viable, they retain some of the same attitudes of oppression that Friere’s work attempts to counteract. For this reason, Carter offers the pedagogy of rhetorical dexterity as a better alternative.

In Chapter 6, Carter sets out the curriculum of rhetorical dexterity and demonstrates how students respond to it. The center of the curriculum is a series of writing assignments in which students are first asked to examine how they have joined other communities of practice and then to use their prior experiences to develop the skills needed to join the academic community of practice. They consider some literacy they already have and then take up in two more papers some literacy in their workplace and some literacy in their recreational activities. In the next task, they look at academic or school literacy in the context of these other communities of practice explored in prior essays. There are ample opportunities for revision in all this work. Finally, students do a comparison and contrast essay in which they consider college writing and some community of practice that has nothing to do with school. The various assignments and activities on which they are based are presented in the Appendix of the book. The balance of the chapter explores students’ responses to the curriculum. It seems clear from the quoted passages that students come to see the academic community of practice to be like others that have specific rules involving the people, situations, language and activities of that community. From this perspective,

the “rules” of academic writing make more sense and students seem to understand how they can use the idea of expertise in one area to develop expertise in another, which is the goal of Carter’s curriculum. The approach, Carter suggests, can be used successfully in any basic writing classroom.

The assignments and students’ responses show that this curriculum does work effectively. It takes the reader a long time to see the advantages of this approach, partly because of the way the book is written. It would have been interesting, for example, to see more samples of the students’ own work, and the book as a whole could have been strengthened by more careful copy-editing. Additional attention to Carter’s often long and convoluted sentences would also have made her ideas easier to understand. Early in the book, for instance, this sentence appears:

At the root of much of the aforementioned scholarship is a series of assumptions about the way literacy functions, assumptions that some have argued work against warrants guiding the majority of current scholarship in basic writing, scholarship that openly resists arguments that fail to consider the material, social, political and cultural conditions shaping basic writers. (27)

After several readings, the point here does become clear, but many sentences require this kind of effort. Thoughtful editing might also have helped Carter to handle her sources more adroitly; as it is, there are many, many references to her distinguished array of sources with little transition or qualification of the scholars whose work she discusses.

Finally, the Conclusion of the book takes up the distinctions between literacy and orality and between literacy and illiteracy, with the goal of greater equity between basic writers and everyone else. Students in basic writing and their instructors should understand the ways in which literacy is connected to power and language both in and out of school, that is, the ways in which it is not an autonomous ability. Overall, this idea clearly

makes sense both theoretically and pedagogically. Such an understanding of the various contexts of literacy offers both students and teachers an opportunity to use the pedagogy of rhetorical dexterity to become expert members of the academic community of practice. Despite some weaknesses in the discussion, the conceptual base for rhetorical dexterity and the teaching approach Carter presents here is sound and effective; it warrants attention and use in basic writing classrooms around the country.