

2 Definitions and Distinctions

The question *How is it that ordinary people go public?* is predicated on a prior distinction—that of *ordinary people*. Iris Marion Young included herself among the ordinary residents of Pittsburgh who together agitated for a citizens’ review board to monitor police conduct. She opened *Inclusion and Democracy* with a “story of ordinary democracy in action” to illustrate that “more-marginalized citizens with fewer resources and official status can sometimes make up for such inequality with organization and time” (3).¹ Welch, too, is interested in how “ordinary people [. . .] go public” (470, 476). For her, it’s the legacy of class struggle that puts most academics and students, their parents and other workers in the same ordinary boat (478–79). Magaly Lavadenz takes *ordinary* further still in her study of transcultural repositioning within immigration raids. *Ordinary* refers not to the status of citizen or authorized worker as defined by the state, but rather to the fact that all of us (our students, ourselves, the community residents with whom we work) are neither political figures, nor celebrities, *and yet*—and here’s the important part—we, in our humanity, are full and representative people in the local publics in which we participate.² “The public sphere,” as David Coogan points out, “does not exist in any meaningful way apart from our own rhetorical investments in it” (“Counterpublics” 462).

Furthermore, the term *ordinary* signals a difference between how ordinary people show up in politicians’ and celebrities’ public discourse and how we ourselves actually go public. In politicians’ public address, the “ordinary person” (Wells 329) is typically “a prop” (330), “the mouthpiece of monologic public policy” (330). Similarly, the ordinary person is cast as the mere recipient of the celebrity’s public appeal, as demonstrated in the photo op that Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie staged for their newborn to turn America’s attention to poverty and disease in Namibia (Smith 61). Interested in how ordinary people piece together “scraps of discursive space” to go public, Susan Wells

is among those who have oriented rhetorical study toward the public discursive practices of ordinary people (326). She and her students go public, for instance, to appoint a minister, to improve the safety of a neighborhood, to expose incidents of police brutality.

Community literacy has made the enterprise of going public central to our own and our students' rhetorical education. Studies in community literacy ask, what does it take for ordinary people to go public? What constitutes situated-public literacies? How might we, as activist rhetoricians, best work to improve the quality of contemporary public life? By forging mutually respectful institutional partnerships? By structuring intercultural inquiry? Or, by designing forums for deliberation to inform wise action? How can a better understanding of ordinary people going public help us, as educators, to figure out "what [. . .] we want from public writing" and to design educational experiences that college students use to develop their own rhetorical acumen (Wells 325)?

This volume suggests that the *community* of community literacy might be best understood in terms of these discursive sites where ordinary people go public. From a rhetorical perspective, then, *community* refers not to existing geographic locales as the idea of a *neighborhood* would suggest (Barton and Hamilton 15) but to symbolic constructs enacted in time and space around shared exigencies—in other words, *local publics*. People construct these communities—at once discursive and physical entities—around distinct rhetorical agendas that range from socializing children into appropriate language use (e.g., Trackton's street theater) to eliciting stakeholders' perspectives on a shared problem (e.g., Pittsburgh's community think tank) to demanding respect under conditions that yield little of it (e.g., Angelstown's shadow system). And people draw upon a whole family of situated-public literacies, in order to do so.

To study sites such as these, below I suggest a parsimonious framework, not so much an overriding set of terms, but just enough structure to put alternative accounts of people going public in relation to one another. I use this framework to emphasize public features of community literacy not always salient in other standard accounts of literacy, such as "Family and Community Literacies" (Cushman, Barbier, Mazak, and Petrone; Qualls). Nor are these public features necessarily addressed in discussions of everyday literacy (Knobel; cf. Nystrand

and Duffy) or, as Barton and Hamilton observe, when community literacy is framed in terms of minority-group practices (15).³

THE LOCAL PUBLIC FRAMEWORK

This chapter introduces the five-point local public framework as a heuristic for comparing alternative accounts of people going public and for considering the implications that follow from them. The point of the framework is not to dissect individual studies as much as to set different kinds of accounts of local public life in relation to one another. We all know better than to compare apples and oranges. In literacy studies, the fruit basket is even more varied, with literacy scholars employing a wide range of research methods—from discourse analysis and cultural critique to action research, including progressive pedagogies and innovative organizational practices. Without deracinating their literate activities from the contexts in which they derive their significance, the framework is my attempt to attend to the rhetorical dynamics at play when ordinary people go public.

Table 2. The local public framework.

Point of Comparison	Brief Definition
1. Guiding Metaphor	the <i>image</i> that describes the discursive space where ordinary people go public, including distinctive <i>features</i>
2. Context	<i>location</i> , as well as other context-specific <i>factors</i> that give public literacies their meaning
3. Tenor of the Discourse	<i>register</i> —the affective quality of the discourse
4. Literacy	key <i>practices</i> that comprise the discourse; how people use writing and words to organize and carry out their purposes for going public
5. Rhetorical Invention	the <i>generative process</i> by which people respond to the exigencies that call the local public into being

Guiding Metaphor

Metaphors figure prominently in literacy research describing the discursive sites where the ordinary people go public. As rhetorical de-

vices, these metaphors serve a dramatic function due to their “magical quality, one difficult to describe in discursive academic language” (J. Murphy 6). Metaphors wield the evocative capacity to conjure up discursive space, to call that space into being. Chaïm Perelman and L. Olbrechts-Tyteca called this quality “presence” (116–17); Michael Warner calls it the “world-making” capacity of style (128). Thick descriptions of local public life are stylistic accomplishments in their own right. Through these descriptions, literacy scholars not only conjure up in readers’ minds local publics such as Trackton’s public stage and Angelstown’s shadow system, but in doing so they have also successfully created another type of discursive space for the study of local public rhetoric: a formal public that you and I as readers and writers also help to maintain.

I have identified the guiding metaphors in these researchers’ accounts of local public life by reading one of two ways. In some cases, the metaphor is designated by the author as a key conceptual home. This is the case, for instance, for the theater in Heath’s *Way with Words*, the link in Barton and Hamilton’s *Local Literacies*, and the shadow system in Cintron’s *Angels’ Town*. In other cases, identifying the core metaphor required a more constructive effort on my part. For instance, Cushman refers the institutional site she studied as a *gatekeeping encounter*. I looked to her analysis to see how a gate operates within such an encounter—to swing shut or to creak open, for instance—and how the image of the gate signals both space beneath and above it, as in the expressions “hitting bottom” and “getting over.”

In identifying each guiding metaphor, I sought evidence of each researcher’s rhetorical understanding of the local public life he or she observed. As heuristics, the researchers’ metaphors work like other such images: to structure and to define “the human conceptual system” (Lakoff and Johnson 6), indicating the “working theories,” or internal representations, people build to interpret and to carry out complex discursive phenomena such as teaching, composing, deliberating, and theory building (Flower, *Construction* 260–62).⁴ For instance, Cintron uses the metaphor of the shadow system to account for the tension between the political theories he brings to his critical ethnography and what he observes on the streets of Angelstown. Cintron calls this metaphor his interpretative scheme. It functions “heuristically” which, he says, “is how all metaphors work” (*Angels’ Town* 176). Because a metaphor suggests similarities between two otherwise

dissimilar objects, metaphors reveal “unsuspected connectives” (Burke 90). To identify these connectives, the framework’s analysis of metaphor includes both the dominant image—the metaphor itself (such as Cintron’s shadow system)—and the metaphor’s distinctive features; for instance, that the shadow system *mimics* the system world and *shelters* difference. Likewise, Heath’s impromptu theater is *dramatic* and *spontaneous*; Brandt’s cultural womb *nurtures* and *prepares*. In connecting their guiding metaphors to such features, the researchers articulate their theories of how local public rhetoric works. For instance, Barton and Hamilton’s *link* between private lives and public institutions carries out its rhetorical work by *connecting* domains to networks for the purpose of social action.

Metaphors preview differences in scholars’ descriptions of local public life. Four additional elements help to identify and to elaborate key distinctions: the *context* that frames the discourse that people use to go public in a given study, the *tenor* of that discourse, the *literacies* that constitute the discourse, and the process of *rhetorical invention* that generates new local public discourse. To define the first three of these elements, I draw from Brian Street’s ideological model of literacy (*Cross-cultural*). In the discussion below, please keep in mind that I am not devising a tool to unearth objective facts but an interpretive framework for making useful distinctions across multiple accounts of ordinary people going public.

Context

Under “context,” the framework attends to two factors: first, the issue of location; second, the “broader features of social and cultural life” that give public discursive activity its meaning (Street, *Cross-cultural* 15). To replace the autonomous model that characterized literacy as a discrete entity that could be transported across contexts for similar effect, Street emphasizes that context-specific factors shape specific literacies and make them meaningful. Positioning their work in relation to the ideological model, for instance, Barton and Hamilton entitle their study of literacy in a British working-class neighborhood *Local Literacies: Reading and Writing in One Community*. For Street, new literacy studies should do more than amass numerous case studies of local literacies. His aim? “[U]seful generalizations” (*Cross-cultural* 10).

In fact, one of the most significant generalizations to be gleaned from the study of local literacies is that community literacy's decidedly public orientation gears its practices toward what Kirk Branch refers to as "the ought to be"—not only the world as it currently is, but also some future-oriented version of the social world as it could be (18).⁵ I believe a rhetorically-centered framework that supports comparisons across accounts of local literacies can enhance our understanding of how different literate practices may "transform local actions into meanings *bound for* or *relevant to* other places" (Brandt and Clinton 349, emphasis added). Attention to location offers a useful vantage point for "bringing [such significant] differences to light" (Atwill 212).

Location. The term *local* has captured the collective imagination of rhetorical scholars for some time (Killingsworth 111). In community-literacy studies *local* is something of a Burkean godterm. Yet depending on whether *local* modifies *knowledge*, *literacy* or *attitudes*, its connotation can change dramatically. Modifying *knowledge*, *local* often carries a positive connotation. For instance, Clifford Geertz's depiction of indigenous people's local knowledge carries over to the CLC's strategies for eliciting the local knowledge of community residents (Flower, "Intercultural Knowledge" 258; Higgins and Brush). Modifying *literacy*, *local* suggests a rather technical distinction; local literacies are situated in domains other than work, school, or government; for instance, the home and the neighborhood (Barton and Hamilton 15). However, Barton and Hamilton chose to document how ordinary people use literacy in their daily lives, in part, because of their social commitment to complicate the "moral panic" that accompanies outcries over falling literacy rates (21). Yet when modifying *attitudes*, *local* often suggests something parochial, bigoted, backwards, even brutal. Genital mutilation is often referred to as a local tradition (e.g., Kissling and Sippel), and George Bush played to rural Ohio's local attitudes in his speech against same-sex marriage in the summer of 2006 (Gilgoff). Similarly, local attitudes can limit the capacity of a public to invite difference into dialogue. As Cintron observes, "a public sphere cannot 'think' beyond what terrifies it" (*Angels' Town* 194). The local public framework lets us consider implications of these and other connotations of *local* and its variations, *locale* and *location*, within accounts of ordinary people going public.

Foremost, location signals the material conditions that shape how people go public; location indicates the politics of place. Without such attention to location, it would be tempting to say that local public life is primarily a rhetorical activity that circulates discourse—and to leave it at that. Yet attending to location highlights the complex interplay here between situated activity (Chaiklin and Lave) and discursive space (Hauser *Vernacular*). For instance, just try to transport Trackton girls' public performances to the schoolyard in Gilmore's study where girls engage in a similar public performance. The lewd lyrics, rhyme, rhythm, clapping and jumping—key aspects of jump roping and stepping—are the same. But the politics of place make the activities associated with the plaza and the playground quite distinct. Indulging in their lewd lyrics in the safety of their secluded community, Trackton girls cleaned up their lyrics when jumping rope at school. In contrast, the girls in Gilmore's study performed their provocative lyrics on the school grounds in overt defiance of the school's authority, for "doing steps" had been banned. Only in this location did their lyrics and body language assume their full rhetorical force. By attending to location, the local public framework illuminates such differences.

Additional Contextual Factors. Location is only one of the contextual cues that imbue literacies with meaning. For Street, context attends to the ideological forces that were missing from the autonomous model of literacy, including the ways that institutions exercise control and that social hierarchies manage their power (*Cross-cultural* 7). In the local public framework, *context* refers to forces that make local publics viable discursive sites for people to go public. These forces include the *cultural agency* of the black-church-as-institution (Brandt, *American* 107), the *linguistic agency* of community residents (Cushman, *Struggle* 34), and the *cultural imaginary* of Angelstown's political landscape (Cintron, *Angels' Town* 141). As Street has argued, accounts of these forces say as much about the researcher's interpretative lens as they do about external reality (*Cross-cultural* 7). The challenge lies in grappling with how these lenses affect our understanding of situated-public literacies.

Tenor of the Discourse

For the New Literacy Group (NLG), *register*—or *tenor*—is a linguistic category referring to the more "typified" choices that together consti-

tute the affective qualities of a discourse (Biber 9). Through its tenor, a discourse encodes attitudes, relational cues, and power differentials—often in highly nuanced ways (Besnier 62–65; Street, *Cross-cultural* 2). The tenor of a discourse is shorthand for subtle and often complex aspects of discourse typically implied through performance rather than stated explicitly in prose. Its closest correlative would be the term *tone* when used to describe affective qualities in a piece of writing. However, the difference is that local public discourse transpires in real time and engages people in all their thinking, feeling, reading, writing, doing, valuing complexity. The NLG got interested in describing the tenor of discourses to characterize how situated literacies differ from essayist qualities of standard academic discourse and the “literate activities and output of the intellectual elite” (Street, *Cross-cultural* 2).

Characterizing the tenor of a discourse, as I have in the following chapters, is a constructive act that asks us to imagine that we can hear first hand the real-time interactions that researchers reconstruct by necessity as text. By attending to cues in the researchers’ descriptions and commentary, we can contrast, for instance, the *edgy competitive play* of Trackton’s impromptu theater to the *literary uplift* of Heller’s garden to the *bite—tempered by sweetness*—of Goldblatt’s community-organizing effort to the *threatening hyperbole* of Cintron’s shadow system. Approaching the tenor of local public discourse in this way may take some getting used to. But I would hope that you will find doing so to be worthwhile, for these registers offer handles (*edgy competitive play* vs. *literary uplift* vs. *threatening hyperbole*) that succinctly capture some of the most significant differences across alternative versions of local public life. Differences in register also emphasize that for an ordinary person to go public, never is it enough simply to decode or encode text; one must also perform specific literacies in the tenor of a given local public.

Literacies

This part of the framework attends to the literacies that ordinary people use to go public. These are the “technical” repertoires affiliated with discursive activity described in a given account (Street, *Cross-cultural* 9). Literacies are *purposeful*—as in Scribner and Cole’s definition of literate practices (236). Literacies help *organize* public life—as in Heath’s notion of a literate event (386). Literacies employ conventions that people may *transform* to meet the demands of their own rhetorical

goals—as in Flower’s definition of a literate act (*Construction* 36–37). In sum, *literacies* organize how people carry out their purposes for going public. As Street would advocate, the framework is also attentive to the ways that that oral and written literacies “mix” in different combinations in different contexts (*Cross-cultural* 10).

Rhetorical Invention

The last element in the local public framework is rhetorical invention: how a discourse permits people to respond to exigencies that arise within its discursive space.⁶ Rhetorical invention solves “the problem [. . .] all writers face,” that of “finding subjects to write about and of developing these subjects” (Lauer 1). Here, I pose not a single definition of rhetorical invention but rather a question: *what’s the version of rhetorical invention embedded within a given account of local public life?* The framework lets us identify both the data and the theoretical explanations driving accounts of rhetorical invention across accounts of local public life.

A key way to compare invention’s generative responses across local publics is to consider its implications—how rhetorical invention translates into choices, practices, and actions. To get at these implications, I conclude each five-point analysis in chapters 4 through 8 with a set of implications and some commentary. In these sections, I consider implications that a given viewpoint holds for some of the most perplexing issues that vex community-literacy studies—issues such as local democracy, program sustainability, the politics of identity, and institutional sponsorship. I draw connections to viewpoints treated in other chapters and to other relevant studies and theories. Foremost, these implication sections focus on “consequences [. . . for] knowledge making, policymaking, and day to day operations” (Royster and Williams, “History” 564). In doing so, these sections attempt to model one way to “keep[. . .] our intellectual engagements with contentious and complex issues productive” (Royster and Williams, “Reading” 142).

In using the local public framework to review community-literacy studies, I have planned my project to be comprehensive although it obviously is not exhaustive. The measure of the framework’s success will be its ability to spur readers to make connections and comparisons of their own.

In part, the framework affords within-type comparisons, as table 3 demonstrates. For instance, both Barton and Hamilton’s *Local Litera-*

Table 3. Prominent images of local public life: A comparative analysis.

1. Guiding Metaphor and its Features	2. Context	3. Tenor of the Discourse	4. Literacies	5. Rhetorical Invention
Heath's impromptu theater	location, power, and integrity	edgy and competitive, curbed by play	performative literacies	practice, modeling, and feedback
Brandt's cultural womb	location and cultural agency	resourceful	interpretive literacies	inspiration, instruction, and transformation
Heller's garden	location, agency, and maturation	uplifting	belletristic literacies	precision at the point of utterance
Barton and Hamilton's link	location, bottom-up initiative, and agency	hybrid—a mix of the formal and the everyday	mobilizing literacies	adapting and retooling
Cushman's gate along a fenceline	location and linguistic agency	dueling dualities	institutional literacies	evaluating effects of acquired literacies transferred to new contexts
Goldblatt's community-organizing effort	location and legacy	biting—tempered by sweetness	consensus-building literacies	a three-part process for transforming problems into issues for action
Flower's community think tank	location and legacy	prophetic—principled and inventive	design literacies and inquiry-driven literacies	explicit instruction in strategic problem solving
Cintrón's shadow system	location and cultural imaginary	threatening and hyperbolic	tactical literacies	cultural appropriation

cies and Cushman's *The Struggle and the Tools* portray the local public as the discursive space where private and public spheres intersect. To depict this intersection, Barton and Hamilton invoke the image of a *link* and stress movement between the private-public binary; Cushman, invokes a *gate* and stresses the binary's outright collapse. By implication, Cushman's gatekeeping encounter makes salient political dynamics that the link does not. Because gatekeeping encounters are sites of intense political struggle, the *institutional literacies* required to navigate such spaces are inherently political tools.

The framework also supports readers' connections to other studies. For instance, a reader could use Barton and Hamilton's working theory of a link to frame Gail Weinstein-Shr's portrait of Chou Chang, a "literacy and cultural broker" for other Hmong immigrants who like himself are trying to negotiate "urban bureaucracy" in downtown Philadelphia (283). Additionally, a reader may consider how other studies extend implications that follow from those reviewed here; for instance, how Lavadenz extends Cushman's analysis of institutional literacies by describing the immigration *raid* (designed to expose illegal immigrants) as the extreme gatekeeping *encounter*.

Like many other artifacts from community-literacy studies, the meaning and function of the local public framework reside not only in the definitions of its terms but also in relation to the larger history of efforts in rhetoric and composition to span the distance between the situated and the public. The next chapter recounts this history as a response to two of the most pressing questions that the field of rhetoric and composition has faced over the past thirty years: *How do ordinary people best exercise their language rights? And how does local democratic discourse actually work?* To that history, we now turn.