Textbook review for *inReview*
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John Trimbur’s *The Call to Write* tries to do it all, and largely succeeds. Noteworthy for its careful blend of theory, process, and technology, the Trimbur text offers veteran and rookie instructors alike myriad means of making composition matter. And this is as it should be, given the text’s wide-ranging and remarkable pedigree. Here we find a strong grounding in social constructivism, writing “as a means to participate meaningfully in the common life and to influence its direction”; *Call*, in this respect, echoes Kenneth Bruffee’s 1993 work, *A Short Course in Writing* (in fact, each author names the other in both texts’ acknowledgments). Other influences include Peter Elbow, whose groundbreaking work on peer workshops receives a thoughtful, deliberate, step-by-step treatment here; Stephen Toulmin, whose development of argumentative reasoning underlies *Call*; and, significantly, Aristotle, whose appeals appear as timely as ever.

Trimbur’s choice of the term “call” to serve as the central, driving metaphor of his text is a wise one. Anticipating an audience of reluctant college freshmen who are, perhaps, set to rebel against what Sharon Crowley would term as their “temporary incarceration” in FYC, Trimbur notes in his introduction that “people who write typically experience some sense of need that can be met by writing” (2). After naming a series of possible “calls,” Trimbur suggests that the following “crucial factors” be considered as part of a written “response”:

your purpose; your readers and the relationship you want to establish with them; the appropriate voice, or tone, of your writing; and the relationship of your writing to the
larger social and cultural context. The type (or genre) of
writing you choose…will depend on large part on the
decisions you make about these factors (3-4).

The text that follows takes the above passage as a rallying cry, as subsequent chapters
demonstrate to student and instructor alike how much thinking, talking, and writing about
writing can really matter. Assignments and activities are fresh, well-developed, yet never
limiting.

Divided into five parts, *Call* begins with “Writing and Reading,” Trimbur’s extensive
explication of writing as a means of positioning the writer within larger social conversations.
Here Trimbur provides context for the act of writing (“everyday life,” “the workplace,” “the
public sphere,” and “school”) and stresses several key aspects of formal argumentation. We’ve
seen much of this before—even current-traditional texts, for example, make much of logical
fallacies and rhetorical appeals. Yet Trimbur’s approach to argument is marked by the same
feature that distinguishes the rest of his text: he makes difficult concepts accessible.

With a nod to Kenneth Burke’s “parlor,” the site of a “vigorous” discussion (110-111),
Trimbur compares argument to “coming into a room where a heated conversation is taking
place” (79). Thus begins his extensive treatment of types of claim, rhetorical appeals, and, most
significantly, a Toulmin-influenced model of argument. It is not enough for Trimbur to
admonish student writers to construct viable claims, and marshal strong evidence in support of
those claims. *Call* introduces students to a rich variety of claims (those that can be substantiated,
those based on evaluation, and those endorsing policy) even as it encourages them to question
the claims they make in their writing. *Call* not only elucidates logical fallacies, but also
challenges students the importance of consistent “enabling assumptions” and reasonable
“backing.” Finally, Trimbur defines and then demonstrates the use of three terms vital to any writer: **ethos, logos, and pathos**, Aristotle’s notions of a writer’s character, a reader’s emotions, and the form and content of a text. Here, Trimbur calls upon instructor and student alike to share a vocabulary of rhetorical criticism that can only serve to augment writing in process.

Thus grounded, the text moves into its second unit, “Writing Projects.” The project assignments underscore the historicity of the first unit, while offering myriad possibilities for public discourse. Trimbur offers individual chapters on letter writing, memoirs, profiles, public documents, reports, commentary, proposals and reviews. Highlights include Trimbur’s careful selection of sample texts. You won’t find widely-anthologized chestnuts like “Once More to the Lake” reprinted here, but instead overlooked gems from Anthony Lane, Mike Rose, Susan Faludi, and other writers not commonly represented in composition anthologies. Student texts, many of which were created by the author’s students at Worcester Polytechnic Institute, crop up frequently—this is a powerful tool, especially in terms of illustrating peer workshop and editing techniques. Articles, letters and reports from sources as diverse as The New Yorker and James Moffett’s *Storm in the Mountains*, a study of textbook-banning, also appear.

Stressed throughout is a clearly-designed, easy to follow (and modify) approach to writing. The chapter on memoir is case and point. After a brief introduction, Trimbur immerses us in three powerful, and powerfully diverse, readings: Gary Soto’s “Black Hair,” Amy Tan’s “Lost Lives of Women,” and Henry Louis Gates, Jr.’s, “In the Kitchen.” If we are to write in the genre, Trimbur suggests, we must understand something of how the genre works, what its parameters are, and how those parameters might be productively, even provocatively challenged. Unlike many other FYC texts, Trimbur doesn’t segregate his readings in late chapters; *Call* always integrates readings at key points, for the purposes of illustration and clarification.
Visual design and technology play key roles in each of Trimbur’s writing assignments. In the memoir unit, students review selections from photo albums and visit others’ homepages on the web. In other units, students give close readings to advocacy group campaigns and visit the websites of various funding sources—such as the National Endowment for the Arts—to learn about writing grants. I’ve taken Trimbur’s twin emphasis on making writing matter publicly and integrating technology to heart in some course projects I’ve designed. Former students of mine have created movie reviews and published them online; others have researched chat rooms and asynchronous discussion boards while drafting commentaries on First Amendment rights.

Each essay assignment is further supported with significant attention to critical analysis of sample texts. Trimbur doesn’t shy away from providing his own expert commentary on the readings he includes. He further provides rich, provocative questions to help students not only develop their own critical assessments of the genre, but also develop their own critical consciousness of that genre’s formal qualities, its aesthetic features. “Why do you think [Amy] Tan begins this way?” Trimbur asks of the author’s opening reference to an old photograph; students are then asked to trace how Tan’s “relationship to the photo” evolves throughout the piece. This is an invitation to critical analysis that stresses not only interpretation but what W. Ross Winterowd would term “craft.” “It is often craft that makes the difference between an effective and an ineffective text,” Winterowd writes, “a text that does what its author intends and a text that does not accomplish its purpose” (229).

Each “step” in the writing process Trimbur elucidates—“Invention,” “Planning,” “Working Draft,” and “Revising”—is further cross-referenced. In his treatment of the “Working Draft” section of memoir, for instance, he notes other sections of Call that address description, comparison and contrast, transitions, aspects of narration, metaphor, and point-of-view. This
work is further buttressed by Trimbur’s inclusion of student drafts, and commentaries on those drafts. Trimbur also encourages students to take a “Writing Inventory” at the end of the unit; he wants the call to write to resonate long after the draft is turned in. Not only this, but Trimbur uses these and other reflexive devices to encourage the social-constructivist imagination, the mind that sees no cross-purposes in writing about the self even as that self must function within a much larger culture. “If memoirs are in part acts of writing that bear witness to and thereby take responsibility for the past,” Trimbur asks the newly-minted memoirist, “how do the selves you have created and recreated express loyalties and social allegiances?” (194).

Unit Three, “Writers at Work,” focuses on collaborative writing, individual writing, and technology, explicitly articulating much of what we may assume—and therefore leave unspoken and silent—in our writing instruction. Trimbur begins the unit by justifying the inclusion of peer opinions in the drafting process: by hearing others’ feedback, Trimbur notes, “writers can consider alternatives that might not otherwise have occurred to them and develop ways of negotiating their differences with others” (463). Trimbur then provides a “case study” of a writing assignment, a combination of practical advice, strong, relevant questions, and student writing samples that trace a draft from its conception to completion. The text also addresses several issues that, as we know, can seriously impact or compromise the quality of interaction among peer writers: group dynamics, the distribution of work, even differences of opinion.

The fourth and fifth units—a “Guide to Research” and “Presenting Your Work,” respectively—are the closest Call comes to replicating the work of so many other FYC texts on the market (a sixth unit, focusing on ten common grammatical problems, is not included in the Brief Edition). Here Trimbur presents the “research process,” and hits the high points of MLA, APA and COS citation styles. Rely on the author, though, to energize much of what might have
been just another tired presentation with a smart, savvy execution of Call’s social mission: here research is presented as something greater than merely locating sources and avoiding plagiarism. Research, for Trimbur, is a means of ingratiating the writer within an extant conversation, discussions that “take place in virtually every sphere of life” (512). To this end, expect not only an overview of print and electronic sources, but also an exceptional, if brief, treatment of fieldwork. Not since Bruce Jackson’s excellent Fieldwork have I seen such a clear-eyed overview of participant/observer research (in fact, Trimbur may be stronger in this regard, as he has the more difficult task of reaching a non-specialized, undergraduate audience). Students, in turn, are amenable to the field-based research tasks Trimbur delineates here; many of my students have designed and conducted face-to-face and online interviews, questionnaires and observations with the guidance offered by this chapter. This work, in turn, has more favorably predisposed many of my students to doing research.

Much the same holds true for the “Document Design” chapter, from the fifth unit. This is a welcome inclusion, as the chapter presents many of the attributes of business and technical writing that might apply to FYC courses. From suggested paper weight (20-pound) to font size (10-12 point) to the use of white space (for indentions, emphasis and clarity), Trimbur brings out many of the formal attributes of student writing that, again, often go unarticulated in the classroom. Technology, of course, plays a key role here, as the author imports graphics and vocabulary (“tombstoning,” “runarounds,” “holes”) to emphasize the visual components of drafting. In this and all units, font styles and sizes switch—sometimes as many as three or four times during a single page—so the visual effect can be busy, cluttered, overstimulating. Yet that same formatting works very much to Trimbur’s advantage in some respects; new users of desktop publishing programs in particular will benefit from the text’s full-color figures.
Even when Call stumbles, its missteps are small. Perhaps the material from Unit Three, “Writers at Work,” might have been included much earlier, as much of the text is grounded on the collaborative/discursive premises detailed in that unit. Certainly Aristotle and Toulmin need to be more present throughout the otherwise strong “Writing Projects” unit: the book does not yet posit a strong enough relationship between claims, argument, and writing assignments that do appear, at first blush, to require claims and arguments (for example, “Profiles” and “Memoirs”). The “Commentary” chapter in particular needs to be better developed along these lines. Perhaps in a future edition Trimbur might include an example-rich treatment of logical fallacies in this chapter, as poor logic often plagues student-authored commentary.

Given Trimbur’s close attention to explicitly articulating classroom practice, it is also surprising that his mention of the writing center’s role in the drafting process is limited to three paragraphs at the tail end of chapter 12. The writing center is here represented as a place to go “talk about writing” with “experienced writers”; students are advised to ask their teachers, or ask writing center tutors, about actual services and policies. This approach is a safe one—certainly, Trimbur is very much aware of the many misunderstandings that can occur between tutors and student writers, as is evidenced in his essay, “Peer Tutoring: A Contradiction in Terms.” Yet it is certainly also safe to say that most, if not all, writing centers work to improve the ability of student writers to negotiate the very same rhetorical contexts Trimbur so clearly delineates throughout the rest of the text. Given, further, the fact that writing centers have become so central to the teaching of writing on many campuses, there needs to be a much more explicit clarification of the link between “the call to write” and how writing centers help writers respond to that call.
The Call to Write, all told, is a rich, inclusive text that never sprawls, but instead presents significant possibilities for any number of classroom approaches. I have used the text in creative nonfiction courses, for “I-Search”-styled research courses, and for more traditional treatments of argumentative writing; in each course, my students and I find the text carefully organized, accessibly written, and always relevant. This is due in no small measure to Trimbur’s inclusion of his own students’ writing, a move I know my own students appreciate. And it is just such a concern with the needs of students—members of communities sustained by the work of language—that distinguishes this text. If the introductory composition requirement is all too often a shout in the wind, a voice that “comes from nowhere, and goes nowhere” (Crowley 242), Trimbur makes sure we, students and instructors alike, can engage that voice in productive conversation.

Works Cited


