

CHAPTER 25.

FEMINIST ACTIVISM IN THE CORE: STUDENT ACTIVISM IN THEORY AND PRACTICE

Katherine Fredlund

University of Memphis

Fredlund writes on her experience teaching Student Activism in Theory and Practice, a senior-level, writing-intensive general education course. Enrolling 45 students from majors all over campus, Fredlund's students collaborated with their community partner to plan and organize the University's annual Take Back The Night event. In her reflection, Fredlund explains how instructors can negotiate student resistance to the terms "feminist" and "activist" while asking the same students to participate in explicitly feminist activism. She emphasizes how engaging with a community partner alleviates some of the tension inherent in requiring feminist activism in general education courses while simultaneously providing instructors an opportunity to teach students about rhetorical effectiveness and civic purposefulness.

INTRODUCING THE COURSE

Student Activism in Theory and Practice is a senior-level and writing-intensive general education course that fulfills a requirement for graduation at Indiana State University (ISU). The course enrolls 45 students and welcomes students from a variety of disciplines across campus, meeting once a week for three hours. While some students may be enrolled in our Gender Studies minor, most students enter the class with little knowledge of either activism or feminism. Despite this lack of initial knowledge, the course's culminating experience asks students to organize our University's annual Take Back The Night (TBTN) event in collaboration with our community partner (a local domestic violence shelter). The course is offered every Fall semester, and TBTN occurs once a year in November.

Immediately following the resource fair, the students hold a rally (in 2014 over 500 people attended the event) that intends to increase awareness of problems of gendered violence both on campus and in our community while also

empowering survivors and their supporters. The event ends with a lengthy march throughout campus (seen in Figure 25.2) that aims to disrupt the normally quiet evenings by chanting and holding signs that remind those who did not attend the event that gendered violence continues to be an issue. Throughout the event, students sell t-shirts, collect material donations, and hope to raise money for a community partner that helped them understand the importance of this issue throughout the semester. The course aims to teach students to solve problems, evaluate the ideas of others, express themselves effectively both orally and in writing, and demonstrate the skills for effective citizenship. A full list of the course's learning outcomes can be found in the "Syllabus" section below.



Figure 25.1. *The Resource Fair before Take Back The Night 2014.*

CREATING AND ANALYZING ACTIVIST RHETORICS

Due to the variety of majors enrolled in the course, we begin with a brief introduction to feminism before turning to our two primary subjects of study: student activism and gendered violence. Like Julie Myatt (Chapter 23, this collection), I often find that while many students agree with the general tenets of feminism, they resist labeling themselves with the term. As a result, I introduce feminism as a conceptual term with Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *We Should All Be Feminists*. I have found that this book speaks to students because it is accessible, and they recognize the author's name from Beyonce's 2014 VMA performance. My community partner then helps students see feminism as an operational term by discussing their everyday work and the importance of supporting survivors of gendered violence. This combination of reading and seeing feminism helps students understand both the ideas behind feminism and the work of feminism.

Throughout the course, students are challenged to reconsider their beliefs about activism and gendered violence through readings, discussions, and guest speakers. Class periods are often discussion based. The written assignments are designed to help students build their rhetorical abilities. Just as Julie Nelson's students face a new writing genre (Wikipedia writing), my students are unfa-

miliar with activist rhetoric, and we, too, begin with rhetorical analysis. Their first assignment asks them to analyze a specific example of activist rhetoric. Next students are asked to create activist rhetorics of their own through two different assignments. For one assignment, they are split into eight work groups that will collaboratively organize TBTN. These groups have different tasks that range from obtaining permits to creating promotional videos to coordinating with community organizations.

The second assignment asks students to create their own project for change (DIY Activist Rhetoric). For this project, students are asked to consider our Community Partner's needs as well as the needs of Take Back The Night. In consultation with their teacher, students develop proposals for this project, and as long as the project produces activist rhetoric and supports either TBTN or our Community Partner, it will be approved. In the past, students have written and then performed Slam Poetry at the Rally, developed an awareness campaign about the services our Community Partner offers, created informational brochures at our community partner's request, developed PSAs for our Community Partner to be played on the campus radio station, and composed videos to be played during the resource fair. This project asks students to identify and then respond to a rhetorical situation while also writing for our community partner. As one student explained, "Our group had to write and perform a slam poem, which was a positive experience. When writing the poem and other parts of the program, it was important to remember who the audience was and what the intention of each part was; that sort of guided how we composed each separate part." Students can work alone or collaborate for their DIY Activist Project. All of this experience creating activist rhetorics is not enough to ensure students have "Demonstrated the skills for effective citizenship and stewardship." In order to meet that learning outcome, reflection is necessary. In Florence Bacabac's discussion of her grant writing course (Chapter 22, this collection), she notes the importance of student reflection within courses that require civic engagement. Recognizing reflection as an essential aspect of feminist intervention, the final writing assignment asks students to compose a reflection that synthesizes their experiences (organizing TBTN, working with our community partner, and composing activist rhetorics) with the course readings.

Feminist interventions seek to create change in the University and beyond. In this course, a number of different feminist interventions take place. First, I challenge my students to think beyond their preconceived (and often negative) notions about feminism and activism. Next, we work together to change the way gendered violence is discussed on campus through our production of TBTN. Additionally, we work with our community partner to create a stronger relationship between the partner and the University, increasing our partner's

visibility and their ability to reach both students and community members who could benefit from their services. Finally, like Stephanie Bower’s course (Chapter 24, this collection), we work to make the invisible visible—providing survivors of gendered violence with a public space where they can use their voices and (sometimes finally) be heard.



Figure 25.2. Students and other attendees march through campus after the TBTN Rally.

LEARNING ABOUT ACTIVIST WORK

Since the University where I teach is located in a conservative area, many of my students enter the course with very negative opinions about activism. In a survey distributed after the course was completed, 100% of the students who responded claimed they either didn’t know anything about activism or had negative opinions about activism when the course began. In a follow-up question that asked how students felt about activism before and after the course, one student explained,

[Activism] made me a little nervous, honestly. I was a little more critical of protests than I am now. I felt like I would never personally engage in something like a sit-in or major protest. [Now] I have a much more positive outlook. I understand more about the logistics of activism, what kind of activism best suits what types of situations, and so on. . . . Now, I feel like I would definitely participate in a sit-in, given the right cause.

Our work with our community partner teaches students lessons about activism that they couldn’t learn from the readings. The same student explained, “Doing the hands-on work for [our community partner] is eye-opening. It connects real

people to real situations and also shows that there is more to helping others than just talking about it—it takes a lot of grunt work.” The combination of readings by activists (found below in the syllabus) and working for an activist community partner helps students learn not only about the important work that activists do but also about the kind of work that happens behind the scenes. Because the organization of the event takes so much time and work, the readings are front-loaded, allowing class time to be devoted to the planning and organization of TBTN as we get closer to the event.

Through a combination of course readings, class discussions, written assignments, interactions with our community partner, and the organization of TBTN, this course aims to introduce students to feminism, activism, gendered violence, and rhetoric. I use feminist pedagogy to challenge my students to question their assumptions and beliefs. As I explain to them, I don’t expect them to leave my course as activists or feminists, but I do expect that they leave the course knowing what feminism and activism are and what feminists and activists do. As Susan Jarratt (2001) explains, feminist pedagogy “is not about forcing all the students to subscribe to a particular political position but rather engaging with students on the terrain of language in the gendered world we all currently inhabit” (p. 118). Students are asked to collaborate with each other, with their community partner, with a variety of campus and community organizations, and with their teacher. They are asked to take part in feminist interventions by producing rhetoric intended to prompt change and awareness. This is an unsurprisingly messy process, but feminism, activism, and writing are all messy too. Ultimately, students leave the course knowing that they composed activist rhetorics, organized an event that reached hundreds of students and community members, connected many different campus and community organizations, raised money for our community partner, and helped raise awareness of gendered violence through their collaborative production of an activist event.

REFLECTIONS

I have found Jacqueline Jones Royster and Gesa E. Kirsch’s principle of an “ethics of care and hope” as a useful way to think about how I approach this course. While they discuss this principle in terms of research, this course has taught me that it is also a useful way to think about feminist pedagogy. They explain:

An ethics of hope and care requires a commitment to be open, flexible, welcoming, patient, introspective, and reflective. It requires looking and looking again, reading and returning to texts, learning about the contexts of those who

use rhetorical strategies under conditions that may be very different from our own. It is learning to withhold judgment, to linger, to observe, and notice what is there and what is missing. It is an attitude, a stance, an inclination to discover new well-embodied truths and to revise old truths. (146)

Approaching the classroom with an ethics of care and hope helps me engage in conversations about gendered violence with my students with patience and empathy. It reminds me that I do not know the experiences that have led them to my classroom, and I do not have the right to judge their complicated relationships with the course content. Instead, I approach their statements and their writing as Royster and Kirsch suggest we approach a text: by “[assuming] a more patient, receptive, quiet stance . . . to think about it—slowly, rather than to make a more aggressive stance in order to ‘do something to’ it as a mechanism for arriving at and accrediting its meaning” (146). This ethics of care and hope gives my students the respect they deserve and creates a classroom environment where students feel safe sharing both their opinions and their experiences.

In this course, I use feminist pedagogy as intervention in order to create change in my University community and often in my students’ lives. At the 2015 TBTN, 9 students from the course chose to stand on stage as stories they wrote about their experiences with sexual assault, rape, and domestic violence were read to the crowd by other classmates. After all of their stories were read, all 9 students returned to the stage, ripped off the pink tape that had been placed in an X over their mouths, threw the tape on the stage, grabbed each other’s hands, and looked at the audience as they said the words “Silent No More” in unison. The host group came up with this idea, but they, like me, were shocked and excited when so many students wanted to stand in front of hundreds of people and have their stories told—often for the first time.

While I approach this course with a feminist pedagogy that intends to intervene in my University Community by creating a student-centered vision of TBTN, my students are the ones who make the lasting impact with their own feminist interventions. I carefully select the course readings and guest speakers in order to help my students see the important work feminists do in our community and elsewhere, but what they do with their newfound knowledge about feminism is what creates a lasting impact. They design the event with my guidance, and this makes the event speak to the University’s students in a way that events run by faculty and staff simply cannot. Often for the first time, students from across the University hear how gendered violence impacts people they know. Both times I taught this course, students from my other classes approached me after the event to note that they had no idea that their friend had

survived gendered violence and that hearing their story was both inspiring and educational. Learning about the topic from other students and friends at TBTN inspires and educates students from across the University. My own feminist intervention only ensures that student voices and ideas become the heart of the event. It is their voices and ideas that then create a lasting impact, and whether students consider themselves feminists or not doesn't seem to matter because for at least one semester they are committed to combating gendered violence through collaboration, education, and rhetorical production.

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APPENDIX A: COURSE SYLLABUS

Course Description

We will begin the course by introducing both feminism and activism and then by discussing a variety of student activist movements—considering how activists use rhetoric both effectively and ineffectively. We will then learn about gendered violence both locally (through our community partnership) and more globally (through a variety of readings and documentaries). During the first half of the semester, we will spend a lot of time learning about activism, feminism, and gendered violence through readings, visits from our community partner, guest speakers, and class discussions. The second half of the semester will be devoted to our collaborative organization of Take Back The Night. The culminating experience of this course asks students to work with their instructor, community partner, and campus community in order to organize our University's annual Take Back the Night Rally and March. The written assignments in this course will ask you to analyze activist rhetoric, create activist rhetoric, and then reflect on your experiences as an organizer of Take Back The Night.

Learning Outcomes

- Locate, critically read, and evaluate information to solve problems
- Critically evaluate the ideas of others
- Apply knowledge and skills within and across the fundamental ways of knowing
- Demonstrate the skills for effective citizenship and stewardship
- Demonstrate an understanding of diverse cultures within and across societies
- Demonstrate an understanding of the ethical implications of decisions and actions
- Express yourself effectively, professionally, and persuasively both orally and in writing (Maule 2010)

Required Texts

Adiche, Chimamanda Ngozi. (2015). *We should all be feminists*. New York, NY: Anchor Books.

hooks, bell. (2000). *Feminism is for everybody: Passionate politics*. Brooklyn, NY: South End Press.

Krakauer, Jon. (2015). *Missoula: Rape and the justice system in a college town*. New York, NY: Doubleday.

Zinn, Howard. (2002). *You can't be neutral on a moving train: A personal history of our times*. Boston, MA: Beacon.

Assignments

Activist Analysis: In class, we will discuss a variety of instances of student activism, read a professor's autobiography about his activism with his students, and watch documentaries about student activism. In order to understand how activism works (and doesn't work), this assignment will ask you to choose ONE student activist movement or specific event and analyze the rhetorical tactics that made this event or movement successful or unsuccessful. In order to complete this assignment successfully, you will need to first summarize the event or movement. Next you will explain the variety of rhetorical tactics the event used, and finally, you will analyze how these rhetorical tactics made the event or movement effective or ineffective. This paper will be 3-4 pages and will make up 20% of your final grade.

DIY Activist Rhetoric: In this course, we will work with a community partner and put on a large campus event. As a student in the course, you will be asked to respond to one or both of those rhetorical situations. Through consultation with your instructor, you will design your own assignment. You can create a printed document or a new media project. You can work alone, or you can work with others. You will be required to get your plan approved by your instructor. In the past, students have written and then performed slam poetry at the TBTN rally; created educational pamphlets about gendered violence to be distributed at the resource fair; developed an educational exercise to be presented at the Rally; met with our community partner to learn about their needs and then created educational documents for them; and created a website for TBTN at our University. This assignment gives you the freedom to choose what you will create for this course. The only requirements are that you create a document or new media project that will be posted or distributed publicly, that the project is for TBTN or our community partner, and that you meet with your instructor to get this project approved. This project is worth 30% of your final grade.

Organization of Take Back The Night: This class will put on TBTN for the University. For TBTN, the class will be divided into eight student groups. Students will be placed in groups based on a discussion we have as a class and an individual survey that asks about your preferences when working with others. Each student group will have a different responsibility during the organization of the event. This assignment will make up 20% of your grade. 10% of that grade will be decided by the teacher. The other 10% will be decided by the members of your group. These will be anonymous and will judge your contribution to the group. The groups are as follows:

1. Hosts and Coordinators: This group will organize and host the Rally. You will make decisions about the content of the Rally and coordinate with speakers and other participants.

2. **March Organizers:** This group will design the March route, research and create chants for the March, and work with University Police to obtain the appropriate permits.
3. **T-Shirts:** This group will create multiple t-shirt designs, present those designs to the class for a vote, price options from a variety of local t-shirt makers, and work with the cheapest t-shirt maker to get the shirts made. After all of this is completed, you will sell the t-shirts the week of TBTN.
4. **Materials:** This group will create posters, pamphlets, programs, and other promotional materials at the request of other groups. You will need to create promotional documents that can be shared digitally and printed.
5. **Video:** This group will create two videos. One will be a promotional video to be shared with campus before the event. The other will be educational and played either during the resource fair or the rally.
6. **Promotion:** This group's main goal is to get people to our event. You should work with campus organizations and student groups (particularly sororities, fraternities, and student athletes) as well as teachers and administrators. You should develop a pitch that you can give when you go to speak with classes and student organizations.
7. **Fundraising:** This group will raise money to help us put on the event. We will need enough money to buy t-shirts and materials for the event, and we want to raise money that we can donate to our community partner as well. This group should begin fundraising early in the semester.
8. **Resource Fair and Drive:** This group will coordinate with our community partner as well as other campus and community groups in order to develop a resource fair that takes place before the Rally and March. This fair should provide attendees with information about a variety of organizations that actively seek to either support survivors of gendered violence or stop gendered violence. You will also work closely with our community partner to learn about their needs and hold a drive that collects donations of food and other resources.

TBTN Reflection: While your participation in the planning of the event will be graded, you will also be asked to critically reflect on your experiences planning and attending TBTN and working with our community partner. This reflection should consider what you learned about activism and community engagement through your participation in TBTN and your DIY Activist Rhetoric Project. You can discuss both your successes and failures. This reflection should be a minimum of 3 pages and is worth 10% of your final grade.

Reading Quizzes: In order to ensure students are doing the reading in the course, reading quizzes will be given randomly. These readings are essential to

your ability to write the larger assignments for the course. These quizzes will be worth 10% of your final grade.

Class Participation: Class Participation (speaking in class, actively engaging in the material, etc.) will be worth 10% of your final grade, as your participation in discussions on the reading and the preparation of TBTN will be essential to this course's success.

Course Schedule

The below course schedule is organized by weeks and includes readings, class activities, and due dates. All readings should be completed before class on the day they are listed. After Week 5, students are expected to be working with their groups to plan TBTN both in and outside of class. After the first week, students are invited to send me news stories or other current events that connect to our course for discussion at the beginning of each class.

Week 1: Course Introduction

- Discussion of Syllabus and Take Back The Night.
- Introduction to our Community Partner: a representative from the Organization will come to class to discuss what they do in our local community and what we can do as a class to help them.
- Read Audre Lorde's "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action" in class. After completing the reading, students should spend 5-10 minutes responding to the following questions in writing:
 - What (not who) are you willing to die for?
 - What are you afraid of?
 - What have you been silent about?

Week 2: Introducing Activism and Feminism

- Read "Reclaiming Activism for Students" by Amy Pason.
- Read *We Should All Be Feminists* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie.
- Class discussion of readings.
- Guest Speaker: Hearing from an Intimate-Partner Violence Survivor.

Week 3: Student Activism

- Read *You Can't be Neutral on a Moving Train* "Introduction," Chapters 1-7.
- Read about student activism and response at UC Davis (Silent Protest), Columbia (Carry That Weight and Emma Sulkowicz), and the University of Michigan (the first openly Gay student President).
- Class discussion of readings.

Week 4: Activism and Hope

- Finish reading *You Can't be Neutral on a Moving Train*.
- Activist Analysis Assignment Discussion.
- In groups, students will investigate and analyze an activist movement or event of their choosing.
- Class discussion about collaboration and organizing TBTN.
- Students complete questionnaire about work preferences for TBTN groups.

Week 5: Gendered Violence on Campus

- Read Parts One, Two, and Three from Jon Krakauer's *Missoula: Rape and The Justice System in a College Town*.
- Class discussion of reading and sexual assault on college campuses.
- During this session, students will be placed into groups for TBTN, and each group will meet during class to begin to discuss their group's plans for their part of the organization. (From here on out, each class will devote at least 30 minutes to TBTN. Students should expect 30 minutes at the end of class to meet with their group, coordinate with other groups, and propose ideas to the entire class during this time.)

Week 6: Student Survivors

- Activist Analysis DUE.
- Finish reading *Missoula*.
- Sexual Assault Survivors and Supporters (SASS) will come to class and help us discuss *Missoula* and gendered violence on campus.
- Discussion of DIY Activism Assignment.

Week 7: Feminism is for Everybody

- Read selections from bell hook's *Feminism is for Everybody*.
- Read "Cosby: The Women. An Unwelcome Sisterhood."
- Visit from Community Partner: During this visit, students should plan to discuss ideas for their DIY Activism assignment with the community partner. Idea need to be approved by your instructor (via email) by noon on Monday.

Week 8: Inventing Take Back The Night

- Read "What is Take Back the Night."
- During this class period, we will look at a variety of different ways TBTN has been put on both at our University and other Universities

in the past. We will look at these as examples and begin to troubleshoot as a class about the elements we want to include in our own event.

- For the second half of class, students will be in their TBTN groups working on their part of TBTN. During this time, students will meet with the instructor individually in order to discuss plans for the DIY Activism Assignment.

Week 9: Understanding Intimate Partner Violence

- Read PDF: “Understanding Gender-based Violence” By Christopher Kilmartin and Julie Allison.
- Discussion of reading and the “Cycle of Violence.”
- While we have worked with our community partner throughout the semester, the first half of this class period will be devoted to helping us better understand the complexities of gender-based violence. Our Community Partner will visit class once again, so if you have more questions for our partner about TBTN or your DIY Activism project, then this is the time to present those questions.
- Watch India’s Daughter.

Week 10: Organizing TBTN

- Each group should come to class prepared to present their plans for TBTN to the class. The class will provide feedback on how to improve or revise your plans. During this class period, groups that need to coordinate with one another should also do so.
- Our Community partner will visit today. All students need to bring a rough draft of your DIY Activism project.
- If you are writing for our partner, then you will meet with them to discuss your draft. If you are writing for TBTN, then the host group and instructor will meet with you to discuss your draft.
- Students will also fill out a mid-project feedback form for the rest of their group. This form is intended to help you improve your collaborations anonymously.

Week 11: Writing Workshop

- TBTN is 3 weeks away!
- All students should bring a revised draft of the DIY Activist Rhetoric project to class. We will workshop these projects in groups. The groups will be organized by the instructor and divided by project type.
- The Materials Group should bring posters, markers, etc. to class, and

each member of the class will make a sign to carry at the march and Rally.

Week 12: Planning TBTN

- TBTN is only two weeks away!
- This class session will be devoted to group work, allowing students to work in their groups or on their DIY Activism projects. Group work should be put first, but if there is nothing you can do in class, then you can use the time for your DIY Activism projects.

Week 13: Dress Rehearsal

- TBTN is one week away!
- DIY Activist Rhetoric project is DUE!
- During this class period, we will finalize our arrangements for TBTN, have a dress rehearsal, and set a schedule for the following week of preparations.

Week 14: TAKE BACK THE NIGHT

- Meet in Event Room at 4 pm. All students must be present for set-up, the event, and clean-up.
- All students will work with their group and the class to put on a great event!

Week 15: Reflecting on TBTN

- During this class we will discuss how TBTN went, consider how it could have gone better, and brainstorm ways to improve TBTN as a way to combat gendered violence.
- Each student will also evaluate their peers' contributions to their group's role in TBTN using the Peer Evaluation Form provided by the instructor.
- Introduction to and discussion of Reflection Assignment.

Week 16: Celebration!

- Reflection Paper Due.
- During this period, our Community Partner will join us, and we will give them the materials we collected for them as well as announce the amount of money we raised. We will celebrate together with a potluck.