CHAPTER 25.
FEMINIST ACTIVISM IN THE CORE: STUDENT ACTIVISM IN THEORY AND PRACTICE

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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.](image)

**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.

REFERENCES


Udwin, L. (Producer and Director). (2015). *India’s Daughter* [Motion Picture]. United Kingdom: Berta Film.

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
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*.
- 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.
CHAPTER 26.
RHETORICAL INTERVENTIONS: A PROJECT DESIGN FOR COMPOSING AND EDITING WIKIPEDIA ARTICLES

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While some scholars have claimed the neutral, unbiased style of Wikipedia writing might be at odds with feminist pedagogies that support experiential knowledge and personal narrative, this project design presents Wikipedia writing to students as a rhetorical challenge. Employing Royster and Kirsch’s (2012) four terms of critical engagement from Feminist Rhetorical Practices, this project narrative describes a sequence of assignments that encourages students to 1) consider how knowledge emerges and is culturally situated; 2) analyze the rhetorical motives and limits of Wikipedia as a community; and 3) practice feminist interventions through the composing and editing of Wikipedia articles.

When my fall 2015 ENG: 3130 Writing for Social Change class looked at the Wikipedia page for our university chancellor, my students were stunned. Debra Saunders-White, who had an impressive career ranging from IBM to the U.S. Department of Education and who was the first female chancellor at our Historically Black University, had a Wikipedia page with three sentences. Saunders-White's page was scant in comparison with the pages of chancellors and presidents at other local and similarly-sized schools. My students knew her accomplishments rivaled theirs, so why, they asked, was her page so meager? Unfortunately, it is no surprise that an African American woman's Wikipedia page is undeveloped compared to her mostly white and male colleagues’ pages, given Wikipedia's well-documented gender gap and its self-acknowledged “systemic bias.”

Race and gender disparities in Wikipedia coverage and authorship are disheartening, but they also offer students and teachers valuable opportunities to rectify disparities, by writing for Wikipedia. Teaching wiki writing encourages
not just collaboration and complication of the writer-reader relationship (Lundin, 2008; Alexander, 2008; Cummings et al. 2008) but also reconsideration of knowledge production and revision (Cummings, 2009; Purdy, 2009, 2010). When students write and edit Wikipedia articles, they produce and revise knowledge, creating a prime opportunity for feminist intervention in Wikipedia (Vetter & Harrington, 2013; Vetter, 2013). However, some scholars suggest that Wikipedia is not conducive to feminist ways of knowing and writing. Cattapan (2012) and Gruwell (2015) argue that the methodologies valued in Wikipedia and its writing style (specifically the requirement to use a neutral point of view) prohibit students from contributing experiential, embodied, or narrative knowledge.

In this project design, I respond to these concerns and assert that when teachers present writing for Wikipedia as a rhetorical challenge, students learn to push the boundaries of acceptable Wikipedia style and content—making feminist and socially conscious interventions—in rhetorically appropriate ways (see appendices A and B for course and project descriptions). I describe a writing for Wikipedia project assigned in a course called Writing for Social Change, a writing-intensive course whose objective was to study and produce activist and socially-motivated texts. Students enrolled were mostly upper-level English and communication majors who identified as African American and female. While a lot of in-class time was dedicated to the project the first half of the semester, in the latter half, students worked independently on their articles, and class time was devoted to other readings and assignments. Through the stages of this project, students engaged in feminist inquiry and practice by questioning “truth” and who makes knowledge, looking for gaps or underrepresented perspectives, contributing their own knowledge, and writing for a public audience. Similar to Stephanie Bower’s digital storytelling project (Chapter 24, this collection), writing for Wikipedia encourages students to engage in community-based research and writing in two important ways: 1) as students go into their communities to find local, valuable, and underrepresented knowledges and 2) as students produce those knowledges and stories to share with (and intervene in) the global Wikipedia community. After outlining some of the potential obstacles for feminist contributions to Wikipedia, I describe the project and its attempts to engage with and overcome these obstacles.

WIKIPEDIA AS A SITE FOR FEMINIST INTERVENTION

Wikipedia, like many encyclopedias, privileges white male, western histories and epistemologies. Sources vary, but most suggest that women make up only 8-16% of editors, and topics more interesting to female audiences are often
undeveloped or absent (Wikimedia Foundation, 2011; Lam et al., 2011; Cohen, 2011). According to Lam et al. (2011), the average female editor makes half the number of edits of the average male editor, female editors tend to leave Wikipedia sooner, and articles with mostly female contributors are often more regulated and contentious. While there are no solid statistics on the race and ethnicity of editors, the dearth of articles related to marginalized histories and cultures, in addition to the demographics of the average user, suggests a serious disparity (Smith, 2015). The Wikimedia Foundation, which runs Wikipedia, acknowledges this “systemic bias” and reports that the average user is a young white educated man with internet access (“Wikipedia: Systemic Bias,” 2015).

Given these biases, it is no wonder why college instructors assign writing for Wikipedia in their courses, yet some instructors suggest the assignment may work against feminist goals and pedagogies. For example, women’s studies professor Alana Cattapan (2012) asked her students to contribute articles related to the women’s movement in Canada. While the assignment was largely successful, she lamented, “Students cannot write in their own voices in Wikipedia, and must conform to a model of writing that might not be true to their understanding of an issue, or reflective of their perspectives” (p. 128). Wikipedia articles are required to use a neutral point of view (NPOV), “which means representing fairly, proportionately, and, as far as possible, without bias, all of the significant views that have been published by reliable sources on a topic” (“Wikipedia: Neutral point of view,” 2015). This policy prevents students from writing first-person narratives, reflecting on their embodied social positions, or explicitly sharing their perspectives—common feminist values. Leigh Gruwell (2015) echoes these concerns in her study of female Wikipedia editors, suggesting that the “objective” and “encyclopedic” writing style discourages women from contributing. The results of her study suggest “the values of the male-dominated discourse community discount feminist ways of knowing, thus alienating and silencing alternative epistemologies and subjectivities” (p. 120). Many of the practices feminist teachers include in their courses conflict with Wikipedia’s guidelines.

However, in addition to these practices, feminist rhetorical scholars encourage using creativity and flexibility to work around/in potentially exclusionary discourses and communities. While NPOV poses some obstacles for making feminist interventions, NPOV and one’s own voice are not mutually exclusive. Beyond the inability to use first-person, there are other ways to express one’s perspective, for example, through construction of a page (e.g., organization, content, images, and links) and through references (e.g., referencing sources, quotes, and statistics that express one’s perspective). Although original research is not an acceptable reference in Wikipedia, finding published texts that support students’ perspectives is still a valuable task. Writing in NPOV does not require disregarding or betraying one’s
beliefs; rather, it may just take more rhetorical work to find ways to express those beliefs. Feminist ways of knowing and writing are expressed in more than just style; publishing a page on a marginalized historical person or revising a page to express an underrepresented point of view is also a feminist intervention.

Cattapan and Gruwell are right that Wikipedia restricts feminist writers in some ways, but we should not overlook other kinds of intervention in the processes preceding publication and writing strategies that push Wikipedia’s guidelines in rhetorically appropriate ways. I define feminist interventions on Wikipedia broadly, as revisions or additions of missing or underrepresented knowledge or perspectives, not necessarily written by or about females or explicitly using “feminist.” While a final draft of an article may not explicitly reflect feminist views, the process of students analyzing, writing, and contributing to Wikipedia is still valuable feminist rhetorical work. I draw my understanding of this work from Royster and Kirsch’s Feminist Rhetorical Practices (2012) which identifies four central terms of engagement in feminist rhetoric and composition: strategic contemplation, critical imagination, social circulation, and globalization. The assignments that I designed for this project urge students to engage with these particular terms and practices.

From the very first week of class, students engaged in “strategic contemplation,” which Royster and Kirsch explain involves entering into a dialogue with texts, considering multiple perspectives, dealing with contradictions, and recognizing that lived, bodily experiences shape the way we research. After digesting articles and statistics about the biases and gaps on Wikipedia, students began to look for the silences and absences in the Wikipedia articles they read. I asked students to complete an analysis of controversial topic pages to identify the rhetorical strategies used to hold multiple points of view in one place (Appendix C). Through this assignment, students saw how editors inserted their perspectives in articles and identified rhetorical strategies that reflected marginalized perspectives. “Critical imagination” pushes students to find those marginalized perspectives. According to Royster and Kirsch, it is an inquiry tool that urges researchers to look for untold stories, question notions of “truth,” and recover important events and stories from the past. To do this work, I took my students to our university’s archives to look for potential article topics (Appendix D). This assignment physically immersed students in the research process and challenged them to find ways to share their findings, carefully and ethically. Relatedly, Royster and Kirsch’s third term “social circulation” emphasizes the social nature of rhetoric, specifically how language moves, changes, and relates—and how power dynamics are reflected in those relations. To employ this term, my students analyzed the systemic biases of Wikipedia articles that were similar to the ones they were writing and then addressed those biases in their own writing (Appendix E). Finally, “globalization,” Royster and Kirsch’s fourth term, is at the heart of the
whole project, as students contributed their own, often local and underrepresented, knowledge to a global (English-speaking) community.

OVERVIEW OF WRITING FOR WIKIPEDIA PROJECT

I assigned this project in an upper-level writing course at a mid-sized, public Historically Black University. Because of the lack of African American historical and cultural articles on Wikipedia (Smith, 2015), I encouraged students to find projects to fill the gap. The final assignment required students to write a new 500-700-word article or expand an existing Wikipedia article by 500-700 words. Because student success with new media projects is often tied to how central and embedded the project is in the course (Sura, 2015), I introduced the project the first week of class and spent the first half of the semester focusing much of our class time on the development of the project. The following describes its five stages, which may be expanded or condensed to meet the demands of various courses.

STAGE ONE: RECOGNIZING THE FEMINIST RHETORICAL CHALLENGE

Because writing for Wikipedia is unlike most other kinds of writing students have done, analyzing Wikipedia is useful for familiarizing students with its style and content guidelines. In some early class discussions, I asked students to identify different kinds of topics/articles (e.g., person, place, event, theory, etc.) and analyze the organization and rhetorical strategies commonly used in each kind. To introduce students to the technical aspects of Wikipedia, students completed a Wikipedia Training (“Wikipedia: Training/For students,” 2015) and The Wikipedia Adventure (“Wikipedia: The Wikipedia Adventure,” 2015) during this first stage. While the former introduces students generally to the purpose and policies of Wikipedia, The Wikipedia Adventure asks students to complete seven “missions,” including starting an account, editing articles, and using talk pages. These interactive assignments help students who are overwhelmed by using wiki markup (the language or code used in Wikipedia) and other technical aspects of the project.

In this first stage, I presented the project as a rhetorical challenge. While I acknowledged that Wikipedia is a community that discourages certain kinds of feminist writing and points of view, I also pointed out opportunities for making meaningful contributions or revisions. This is when we began discussing NPOV and its restrictions—a conversation which I couched in a larger discussion of how dominant and feminist epistemologies manifest in encyclopedias. I asked students to analyze controversial pages on Wikipedia to identify some of the strategies they saw used to present varying, unorthodox, and radical opinions
in conventionally appropriate ways (Appendix C). Some of the strategies my students identified were word choice; number of facts and statistics; amount of contextual information and content; cultural points of view included and excluded; organization; direct quotes from the subject or from parties directly involved; links to other pages (making conceptual connections to other people, events, or ideas); and visual arguments (e.g., photos, videos, tables, and graphs). I suggested students use these same rhetorical strategies in the composing of their articles, to find ways to include their critical or feminist perspectives in rhetorically acceptable ways for Wikipedia.

**Stage Two: Finding a Gap or Disparity**

The main goal in this stage is to help students find a topic. I took my class to our university archives where students looked through artifacts related to the history of our university and city. Students completed a two-part assignment (Appendix D) that asked them to immerse themselves in the archives, to seek out intriguing stories, and to find a corresponding gap on Wikipedia. As students discovered accounts of the significant events, people, and organizations that built our community, they often found stories they felt compelled to share and developed a sense of responsibility to the community to present their research ethically. The archive trip encouraged personal connections to community research yet challenged students to determine how to express that investment in Wikipedia. For students who did not find a topic in the archives, I shared the WikiProject Directory which lists groups dedicated to developing articles in particular areas, e.g., African diaspora and women’s history. At the end of this stage, I asked students to write a proposal for an article, and I held one-on-one conferences with them to address their individual questions and concerns.

**Stage Three: Becoming the Expert**

During this stage, students gathered all of the sources and content for their articles and began organizing it. In class, we developed outlines, organized information, and practiced paraphrasing sources. Another useful in-class activity was expanding an undeveloped university-related page together; this allows the class to walk through the process of finding and evaluating sources according to Wikipedia’s guidelines, organizing the writing based on analysis of similar pages, paraphrasing sources, and drafting, revising, and writing together. Through this process, students negotiated together how to communicate their investments and values in the campus community to the global Wikipedia community. Once the class had a working draft, I showed students how to move it into a Wikipedia
Rhetorical Interventions

Sandbox (a test-run space in which writers experiment with wiki markup) where we could practice making section headings, adding references and footnotes, and linking to other pages. Finally, I published our contribution during class so students could see that process.

STAGE FOUR: RECONCILING FEMINIST AND NEUTRAL POINT OF VIEWS

Through workshops and peer review, students continued to develop and revise their articles. In class, we reviewed NPOV, since adhering to it is necessary for successful publication. To think more about the purpose and limitations of NPOV, students completed an exercise about systemic bias on Wikipedia (Appendix E). Going over systemic bias at this point helps students figure out how they might respond to or counteract those biases in their own articles, making more or less explicitly feminist interventions in the Wikipedia community. Additionally, reflective assignments during this stage are valuable supplements that offer students opportunities to write about their experiences in first-person; these exercises also spur discussions about if/how some of that writing could be revised using NPOV and included in their drafts. At the end of this stage, I held a second round of one-on-one conferences with students to address their individual questions about their articles and publication.

STAGE FIVE: CONNECTING COMMUNITIES

Finally, students moved their articles into sandboxes so they could practice using wiki markup and adding headings, references, footnotes, links, etc. I recommend asking students to publish their articles with at least a few weeks remaining in the semester so teachers may work with students whose articles may be flagged or removed. To recognize and celebrate students’ addition of locally significant stories to Wikipedia, I asked students to share their contributions in a final class period.

REFLECTIONS

The results of this project were mostly impressive: students published or expanded articles on valuable topics like notable university alumni, local Civil Rights movements, African American politicians, and the effects of urban renewal on our city. However, my dual goals of wanting students to engage in feminist analysis and produce a text in wiki markup proved to be frustrating for some students. While students’ work throughout the semester certainly showed critical analysis of the purpose and limits of Wikipedia, when it came to writing their own articles, students were often more concerned about meeting the guidelines.
Some students included images, design, or quotes to put forth their perspective on a topic, but many students seemed to feel uncomfortable pushing the boundaries. I designed assignments to encourage students to question what it means to create knowledge and to work against dominant, masculine discourses, but it was hard to sustain that work when students felt the mounting pressures of choosing a topic, researching, and writing. Students’ concerns about the logistics of the assignment often eclipsed my plans for critical discussions and analyses of dominant epistemologies and methodologies. This tension is somewhat unavoidable, but starting the project early in the semester allows some flexibility in the schedule to address particular concerns as they arise. This extra time is especially important for students to acclimate to the unique conventions of Wikipedia. Also, focusing more on editing existing articles and adding marginalized perspectives might help students focus their energy less on finding a topic and more on developing feminist and critical intervention in existing pages.

Despite offering many possibilities for feminist intervention, writing for Wikipedia is a challenging project for students and teachers. Both my students and I had our writing on Wikipedia changed, reverted, or flagged. Recognizing the difficulty of entering a self-regulating, internet-savvy community like this is important to take into account when assessing this project. Because students need to simultaneously use their technical, research, and writing skills, I found it constructive to include in-class and take-home assignments that strengthen these three skills in tandem. I suggest grading the project holistically based on all of the assignments and drafts leading up to publication and not weighing the results of publication too heavily. Explaining to students how the project will be assessed alleviates some of the pressure of publishing. The stakes are understandably high for students—what they spent a whole semester writing could be reverted in an hour. Still, this project provides opportunities for feminist critique of dominant discourses and openings for feminist, local interventions in the Wikipedia community. Writing for a global public audience is a challenge but also a call to contribute knowledges and perspectives that need to be shared.

REFERENCES


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**APPENDIX A: COURSE DESCRIPTION AND SLOS**

**ENG 3130: Writing for Social Change**

**Course Description**

We often think of the writing that we do in college as a means to pass a course or earn a degree, but our writing also has social and political implications. This course explores how writing and rhetoric (traditionally conceived but also including oral, visual, auditory, digital, and bodily texts and discourses) works to effect
social change. One of the goals for this course is to expand the audiences for our writing beyond the classroom, to reach people in our campus community and the other communities that each of us is a part. Thus, we will begin by analyzing texts that inspire (or intend to inspire) social change to determine what kinds of rhetorical choices are available to us as we produce our own texts. Through the study of the purposes, contexts, audiences, and rhetorical choices attached to particular texts and social issues, we will develop a better understanding of how we might most effectively persuade in the development of our own projects. For the purpose of this course, writing or composing will be broadly defined. While I will ask you to produce more traditional kinds of academic writing that require scholarly analysis and research, I will also ask you to read and create a variety of texts across genre and media (e.g., personal narrative, digital texts, visual texts).

**Student Learning Outcomes**

- Given instruction in genre analysis strategies, students will apply the method to several documents to help them clarify the characteristic features of unfamiliar genres.
- Given instruction in rhetorical concepts (e.g., rhetorical situation, exigence, kairos, audience, purpose), students will rhetorically analyze their own and others’ writing.
- In the process of composing their own civic writings, students will use the aforementioned methods to understand a given writing situation and make choices among approaches.

**APPENDIX B: PROJECT SYLLABUS FOR WRITING WIKIPEDIA ARTICLES**

**ENG 3130: Writing for Social Change**

**Assignment Description**

One of your main projects in this course will be writing or expanding a Wikipedia article. Wikipedia, while a great advancement in democratizing who produces, edits, and accesses knowledge, still largely represents those who are already predominant in world history: western white males. The presence of women and minorities on Wikipedia—as writers and subjects of articles—is seriously lacking. In this project, you will add content to Wikipedia’s global, digital body of knowledge. You will write a Wikipedia article that does not yet exist on a topic you deem important or expand an existing article. We will complete a sequence of assignments that will ask you to analyze Wikipedia as a knowledge-producing community; conduct research to find a topic for your article or expansion; study
Wikipedia’s style and structure rhetorically; practice writing in NPOV style; and finally draft, revise, and publish your own writing on Wikipedia.

Goals for the Project

- (Re)consider how knowledges are created, shared, valued, and culturally situated
- Analyze the rhetorical motives and limits of Wikipedia as a community
- Use wiki markup (e.g., headers, links, images, references, etc.) to structure writing in rhetorically purposeful ways
- Practice writing for social change through adding missing or underrepresented knowledge to Wikipedia

Schedule Overview: In-Class Assignments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage One (weeks 1-2) Recognizing the Feminist Rhetorical Challenge</th>
<th>Introduce the project; Analyze articles to identify different kinds of pages and common rhetorical strategies; Discuss knowledge production and feminist epistemology; Introduce NPOV; Complete Analyzing Controversial Topic Pages assignment (Appendix C)</th>
<th>Complete Wikipedia training for students and the Wikipedia Adventure; Read “Wikipedia is Good for You” (James Purdy), excerpt from Writing to Change the World, (Mary Pipher), “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action” (Audre Lorde)</th>
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<tr>
<td>Stage Two (weeks 3-4) Finding a Gap or Disparity</td>
<td>Take a trip to the university archives; Look at the Wikiproject Directory; Conference one-on-one about proposals</td>
<td>Complete Trip to the Archives assignment (Appendix D); Write a proposal for article/ expansion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stage Three (weeks 5-6) Becoming the Expert</td>
<td>Take a trip to the library to find sources; Practice expanding a university-related article as a class and publish it; Practice paraphrasing sources and referencing in wiki markup</td>
<td>Write outline for article/ expansion, Contribute writing to the university-related article the class is expanding</td>
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<tr>
<td>Stage Four (weeks 7-9) Reconciling Feminist and Neutral Point of Views</td>
<td>Complete Systemic Bias assignment (Appendix E); Review NPOV; Peer review drafts; Conference one-on-one about final drafts and publishing</td>
<td>Write draft of article/ expansion; Return peer review feedback; Watch YouTube tutorials on making a Sandbox and publishing; Revise draft</td>
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</table>
Stage Five (weeks 10-11)
Connecting Communities
Troubleshoot any issues with publishing
Move drafts to a Sandbox; Publish article/expansion

Post-Project (weeks 12+)
Additional 2-3 weeks built in for students whose writing has been flagged or removed
Reflect on project; Meet one-on-one as needed
Present Wikipedia contribution

APPENDIX C: ANALYZING CONTROVERSIAL TOPIC PAGES ON WIKIPEDIA ASSIGNMENT

The goal of this assignment is to identify the rhetorical strategies used to express multiple, conflicting, or radical points of view in Wikipedia pages. These same strategies may be used in the composition of your Wikipedia articles.

Choose 1) a controversial social or political issue; 2) a controversial person; and 3) a controversial event.

Find the corresponding Wikipedia pages and answer the following:

1. How do the pages represent the various sides of the controversies?
2. Are these pages organized or designed differently than pages about less controversial topics? If so, how?
3. What kinds of sources do these pages use?
4. What kinds of words are used to describe what is controversial about the topics? List at least 10 for each page.
5. Imagine that you have a radical opinion about these topics. How could you include that opinion in ways that would be acceptable for Wikipedia’s guidelines?

APPENDIX D: TRIP TO THE ARCHIVES ASSIGNMENT

Today we will take a trip to our university’s archives to look for potential article topics.

Goals for this assignment

- Find some artifacts that reflect an underrepresented history that you
think is worth sharing with the global Wikipedia community.
• Practice reading and analyzing different kinds of texts to determine what information would be most interesting/important to contribute.
• Following research in Wikipedia, identify ways to interject that information in socially conscious ways.

Part One: Collecting Data
For the first part of this assignment, you will record the artifacts that you find in the archives.

Make a list of the various topics you encounter in the archives (e.g., people, places, monuments, ideas, theories, things, organizations, events, etc.). What stories did you find? What kinds of social issues were highlighted? What was most surprising about what you found?

Part Two: Finding the Knowledge Gaps on Wikipedia (after class)
Now that you’ve had a chance to sift through the archives, do some research in Wikipedia to see what and how the topics you found in the archives are represented. Write a few paragraphs describing the gaps you found and how you might fill them with the research that you did in the archives. Consider whether the sources you found in the archives would be acceptable to use on Wikipedia.

APPENDIX E: SYSTEMIC BIAS ON WIKIPEDIA ASSIGNMENT

The goal of this assignment is to identify different kinds of systemic biases in Wikipedia articles and to consider how you can counteract systemic biases in composing your own article.

According to Wikipedia’s page on “Systemic Bias,” the average Wikipedian is

(1) a male, (2) technically inclined, (3) formally educated,
(4) an English speaker (native or non-native), (5) aged 15-49,
(6) from a majority-Christian country, (7) from a developed nation, (8) from the Northern Hemisphere, and (9) likely employed as a white-collar worker or enrolled as a student rather than being employed as a blue-collar worker.

English Wikipedia acknowledges the following systemic biases, present both in number of articles and/or in perspective:

1. Social class bias (e.g., because access to the internet requires a certain amount of privilege, topics relating to the less privileged are often neglected)
2. Reference/source bias (e.g., many of the most cited references are for-profit news corporations)
3. Perspective bias (e.g., universal topics, like “lunch,” are written from the perspective of those in industrialized countries instead of developing countries)

4. Geographical bias (e.g., there are many more pages on Anglophone/European topics than Chinese or Indian, despite China and India having most of the world’s population)

5. Popular culture bias (e.g., media produced in the US, UK, and Japan are more widely covered than media produced in other countries)

6. Language bias (e.g., native English speakers tend to rely on sources written in English, perhaps overlooking important texts in other languages)

7. Publication bias (e.g., because it is easier to find sources online, print or hard to find sources may be neglected)

8. Cultural impact bias (e.g., tragedies in developed countries are portrayed as more important than in developing countries)

9. Historical bias (e.g., in descriptions of historical events, some accounts are valued over others)

10. Religious bias (e.g., articles that include a “Religious Views” section often include only Christian, Islamic, or Jewish perspectives but not other religions)

11. “Controversial fringe topic” bias (e.g., controversial topics receive more attention than non-controversial ones)

12. Marketing or corporate bias (e.g., people or organizations may use articles as marketing tools)

13. Length bias (e.g., articles interesting to English-speaking audiences are longer than those written for audiences who speak other languages)

14. Name bias (e.g., a search for an article whose name has several meanings defaults to what is most popular to the average Wikipedian)

15. Timing bias (e.g., current events in English-speaking nations are covered and edited more frequently than others)

16. Hemisphere bias (e.g., more articles are written from a Northern Hemisphere perspective, which is especially significant for science-related topics)

17. Image bias (e.g., it may be harder to find images that adhere to Wikipedia’s guidelines for profiles of people in developing countries)

[These examples are paraphrased from the “Systemic Bias” page in 2015.]

Responding to Systemic Biases

Look at several articles that are related to or similar to the one you will be writing/expanding and consider the following questions:
1. What kinds of biases (see list above) do you see in those articles?
2. How are these biases present (e.g., in content, style, organization, images, references, etc.)?
3. How can you respond to existing biases in your proposed article or expansion?
4. Finally, what kinds of bias do you have, given your location, experiences, beliefs, identities, etc.? How might you work against them in composing your article/expansion?