

The Writing on the Wall: Activist Rhetorics, Public Writing, and Responsible Pedagogy



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Abstract: Drawing from their experiences teaching two different activism-focused writing courses, the authors consider the benefits, pitfalls, and potential dangers of activist writing pedagogy. Scott provides a retrospective on a rhetoric and writing course focused on the employment of digital rhetoric, while Katherine reflects on an activist-rhetoric course that culminated in the execution of an annual Take Back the Night rally. Despite the risk of “politicizing the classroom,” the authors argue that activist pedagogy, when thoughtfully implemented, can help students (no matter their political leanings) learn how to write, act, and think—necessary skills for a democratic society. Yet, while both authors support activist-focused rhetoric and writing courses, they also examine the ethical, pedagogical, occupational, and even legal issues that might arise from teaching such courses.

In “The Rhetorician as an Agent for Social Change,” Ellen Cushman concludes that, “we’re not doing enough because we’re acting within the role of the teacher that has been perpetuated by the institution, and thus [such] keeps us from breaking down the barriers between the university and community” (24). In the two decades since the article’s publication, composition teachers have found a myriad of ways to break down the barriers she refers to in that article. Incorporating methods from service-learning, critical, feminist, and other radical pedagogies, teachers repeatedly find that courses that engage with and write for the public benefit students, particularly when it comes to student understanding of audience and the rhetorical situation. Some have even gone as far as to argue that such courses might save the humanities from a crisis caused by “[increasing isolation] from the life of the larger society” (Spellmeyer 4).

While service-learning courses often ask students to write for a community partner, public writing courses that focus on activism may or may not require a community partner in order to produce public writing. Working with a community partner is time consuming, and thus focusing a course on activism gives students opportunities to create public writing without putting the extra burden on the instructor that service-learning courses require. That said, focusing courses on activism requires that teachers create writing assignments that are realistic, possible to complete in one semester, and engage with the public despite lacking the formal outlet for distribution that one might find with a community partner. Additionally, focusing public writing courses on activism also means exposing students to a kind of public writing that carries risks as well as rewards.

But when has rhetoric and writing not been public, at least to some degree? Demarcating the classroom from the “real world” only produces artifice and formulaic exercise. Indeed, breaking down the barriers between university and community via public writing courses allows for rewarding experiences that provide students with what Nora Bacon calls “authentic rhetorical situations” (45). Yet when courses ask students not only to write for the public but also to create activist rhetorics, the barrier between teacher and student can also break down, presenting teachers with ethical quagmires they often cannot foresee. Thus we do not only need to ask ourselves what we want from public writing courses; we also need to ask if students are ready to face the consequences of public writing when activism is involved and question whether the risks students encounter when engaging in activism are worth the rewards.

In Defense of Activist Pedagogy

Following the Ancient Greek philosophy of education for citizenship (*paideia*), the two courses discussed in this article

understand education as an essential aspect of democratic society. Rather than understanding education as only professionalization, *paidea* conceives of education as a lifelong process that not only increases the student's intellect but also their morals, thus better preparing them for civic life. Translating this to the present day, the goal of education, especially education within the humanities, is not to produce productive members of a late capitalist logic or society but rather to produce effective citizens. Such citizens need a rhetorical education so they can both analyze the rhetoric intended to persuade them and so they can participate in society and create change. Courses that combine public writing with activism provide a unique opportunity for civic education, as students are not given concrete directions about how to combat societal issues. Instead, they have to evaluate the rhetorical situation and respond accordingly. While such a task is challenging for both the students and the teacher, it is also realistic: hegemony always has a stake in maintaining the status quo and will not provide citizens with directions for creating change and resisting threats to democracy. Asking students to participate in activist public writing affords students an authentic audience and an authentic rhetorical situation: one that is not dictated to or devised for them but one they must create themselves.

Rhetoric cannot be divorced from ethics, politics, or ideology. As Seth Kahn and JongHwa Lee note, “democracy and civic engagement have been core elements of the rhetorical tradition for thousands of years” (1). In fact, rhetoric can arguably be considered the performance of ethics, politics, and ideology: the art of persuasion denotes both a belief (*doxa*) and the persuasive application of that belief (*praxis*), engendering the world as we know it (*aletheia*). The *rhetorical process* thus always involves determinations of value (ethics), power (politics), and common ideas (ideology). We can trace this condition of rhetoric back to its origins, when the Sophists' skepticism regarding truth (*episteme/logos*) was nonetheless supplemented by a focus on virtue (*arête*). For the Sophists, the function and place of rhetoric was always a matter of public and political concern; they understood, long before Michel Foucault, that language/discourse and power structured any semblance of truth. These “truths,” as *rhetorically produced*, mediated the *polis*, which is to say public life. In the wake of a “post-truth” era, littered with “alternative facts” and “fake news,” we have much to learn from the Sophists. First, rhetoric is always public and the public can be persuaded via ideology and arrangements of power far more easily than it can be taught truth. Second, because of this, we must not only return to an emphasis on the public dimension of rhetoric; we must also return to an emphasis on the virtue of the public good and well-being.

Civic education provides students with the critical tools necessary to be informed, participatory, critically-engaged citizens. As rhetoric, from antiquity to the contemporary moment, most directly approaches such pedagogical tasks, we see the question of “activism” as one only of degree. We are always already situated in the *polis*—in the world and its affairs that circumscribe us. To that end, “activism” means only *to rhetorically act* with the goal of promoting change. To *not* act, to not participate or engage (especially when informed), is not only to be complicit; it is also its own form of action—as Howard Zinn famously notes, “you can't be neutral on a moving train.” Activism and the desired learning outcomes of a civic education thus go hand in hand. The rhetorical exigency of civic education demands that it is not enough to merely believe in something; one must use the available means of persuasion to enact such—lest we have no rhetoric and, by extension, no civics at all.

Thus, when one asks, “what about students who would rather not engage in activism?” we not only return to Zinn's poignant remark, but we also (re)read and translate this question as: what about students who do not want a civic education? Fair enough: students can choose to not register for the course or they can withdraw. The course description and/or the syllabus should be clear about the expectations of a rhetorically focused activist course. Regardless of whether or not a student registers for the course and/or withdraws from it, however, the fact remains that one cannot withdraw from the world (the *polis*) that envelopes them. It is precisely because we are always, constantly, within the vicissitudes of civil society (ethics, politics, ideology—that is, rhetoric) that the question of non-engagement is impossible in the first place. You either actively engage the *polis* or you passively, tacitly support its actions.

Additionally, one might ask if activism is authentic when it is prompted by a course. The question of authenticity and activism is nothing new. Since the Sixties (at least), activism has been characterized as fashion, style, or subculture. We argue, simply: if civic engagement and participation, as activism so directly provides, is a fashion or style then *be more fashionable and stylish*. For a culture that covets consumption in general, it is curious that the same culture so often rejects the consumption of civic engagement. Even more to the point: what activism *is not* prompted by education? The call to activism and the intended result of activism are the same: to inform and encourage participation, critical dialogue, and social change. A course in rhetoric and activism should not tell students what to think or how to act; it should teach students how to think (critically and rhetorically) and help them to discover the actions available for the enactment of a given position. Responsible pedagogy and the successful implementation of these courses require instructors to respect students' agency. Indeed, the goal in these courses should be productive but critical dialogue. Students who disagree with course material or challenge the ideology behind activist work are furthering the goals of civic education by participating in productive dialogue. Such an approach demands some level

of authenticity, despite the reality that the authenticity of activism taking place within a course is going to be, in some ways, limited by the very existence of said course.

Of course, if we entertain a certain ideology that compels us to believe that humanities education is always already assumed to indoctrinate students, then pushing such concepts into civic praxis (i.e., activism) will surely be seen as a glaring form of indoctrination. The notion of indoctrination in humanities education, particularly with regard to a course in rhetoric and activism, seems to be as such: you already tell them *what to think*; now you want to tell them *how to act*. We, however, reject the assumption that such courses attempt to indoctrinate students. First, and again, we only seek to teach students *how to think* (critically and rhetorically) and to help them discover the actions available to them if they choose to actively participate in society. Such courses provide students with rhetorical tools that they can use beyond the course, no matter how those students identify politically. Second, unless we wish to demonize activism as a concept and practice in whole, we sincerely cannot change the fact that the most historically recognizable activism has been progressive, left-oriented movements. We do not write history; we teach only how to participate in it.

Such respect for student experiences and beliefs is particularly important when asking students to write for and act (rhetorically) in the public. As the authors' experiences as instructors in the two activist courses discussed below will illustrate, such courses carry significant risk, especially when students are given the freedom to create their own assignments. Whether students are writing about personal experiences or posting activist rhetoric online, teachers cannot always control the life of the students' public writing or the public reaction to such writing. Part of this risk results from recognizing student agency and providing the space for students to choose how they will meet the learning outcomes of the course. Thus, these courses challenge teachers to carefully consider and balance their respect of student agency with their responsibility to protect their students.

The rest of this article discusses situations that arose in two different courses focused on activism in order to interrogate issues of student agency, teacher responsibility, digital surveillance, and public-personal writing when formally teaching activist, public rhetorics. In short, the courses discussed below offer examples of an education concerned with *arête* (virtue, goodness, ethics) and with how to enact *arête*. Our aim in these courses is not to teach what *arête* is but rather to discover *arête* with our students—through discussion, reading, and action. If such a pedagogy is somehow considered dangerous, then such a pedagogy is all the more necessary.

Course One: Activist and Public Rhetoric and Writing Online, Redoubled

Scott taught a 100-level course on writing and the historical tradition of activism at a top-tier public research university in the South. The course studied the rhetorical tactics of various movements over a wide span of time, culminating in the contemporary moment. Ubiquitous computing (ubicom) marks this contemporary moment: digital technologies (smart phones, laptop or desktop computers, Google glass, etc.) redouble the connection between rhetoric and public (i.e., *public rhetorics*). What we might call ubicom, as an extension of electracry (an apparatus distinguished from literacy and orality), complicates and reconfigures the rhetorical efficacy of contemporary activist movements, primarily through the collapse of space and time.^{1} Indeed, the spatio-temporal dimensions of the internet specifically account for this new and still-emerging formation of public rhetoric—a *public rhetoric redoubled*.^{2} By way of ubicom, “public” and “rhetoric” (iterated online) are virtually infinite in space and timeless, eternal. Spatially, the internet is always expanding, especially in terms of retention; temporally, as the saying goes, the internet never forgets. This carries great potential and great risk for rhetors, activists, and rhetor-activists.

Reflecting on this course, “Writing and The Rhetorical Tradition of Activism,” Scott examines the benefits and consequences of public writing and rhetoric in online spaces, as well as the question of pedagogical ethics therein when teaching such. In particular, the instructor will focus on public writing and rhetoric and ideology, student well-being (ethics), rhetoric vs. law (politics), and the tension between the democratic character of online public rhetoric and the potential surveillance of such (power).

A (Dis)Course on Activism and Rhetoric

A course on activism and rhetoric seems logical, appropriate, even necessary.^{3} Activism relies upon eloquent and effective rhetoric in various genres (speeches, signs, chants, slogans, hashtags, etc.); historically, college students constitute a significant cross-section of activist activity; and directly linking activism and rhetoric demonstrates to students the real-world impact and necessity of rhetoric, further breaking down the false divide between rhetoric and writing taught “in here” (the classroom) and the rhetoric and politics of everyday life “out there.” This methodological and pedagogical approach of world-classroom contingency thus considers, as John Muckelbauer puts it, “*not what the proposition is [but] what the proposition does*” (18). The course thus began with an analysis of activist

rhetoric/writing and the efficacy of their propositions, as given in, to, and received by, the public. In short, we analyzed and measured the success of activist rhetoric/writing in terms of what actions they were able to compel. We considered activist rhetoric/writing as inherently public rhetorics and writings.

We reviewed and analyzed activist rhetoric/writing not only as public rhetoric/writing, but as the reappropriation of dominant ideology (hegemony). Indeed, as Louis Althusser notes, we are never outside of ideology, with ideology operating as a matter-of-fact, “common sense” rhetoric, and to such a degree that such rhetoric becomes unconsciously assumed (Althusser).^{4} If we are never outside of ideology, never outside of the (per)*suasive* force of language and discourse (rhetoric and writing), then in resistance one can only ever expose, invert, and/or reappropriate ideology. This rhetorico-activist strategy extends from the methods and principles of rhetoric and composition itself, as James Berlin notes: “The question of ideology has never been far from discussions of writing in the modern American college” (447). Activist rhetoric/writing thus only arrives as the public application of re- and disfigured ideologies: “A rhetoric can never be innocent, can never be a disinterested arbiter of the ideological claims of others because it is always already serving certain ideological claims” (Berlin 477). Ideology mediates the public, and ideology cannot be extricated from rhetoric.

Insofar as *activist* rhetoric/writing is categorically and necessarily *public* rhetoric/writing, the course found this approach to ideology to be true in style and content. Protest signs, chants, and refrains in speeches mirror the ideological import of corporate logos, marketing slogans, and commercial jingles, respectively. The activist-rhetor and salesperson are both (per)*suasive* agents: the former focuses on values or ethics (and subsequent action in service of such), while the latter focuses on consumption of commodities, but the fundamental, rhetorical logic is the same for both. Both use ideology as rhetoric/writing for the general public. Today, the rhetoric of hashtags, memes, and viral videos also mimic the public appeal of capitalist logic. We cannot think public rhetoric/writing as divorced from ideology, nor from capitalist logic.^{5} Activist rhetoric/writing (as public rhetoric/writing) attempts to appeal to the public by diverting and perverting such ideologies: traditionally, through concise signs, chants, or speech refrains or, in more contemporary times, the co-opting of hashtags, memes that reference popular culture, or viral videos that imitate the logic of the commercial.

It became clear that contemporary iterations of “public writing” through the digital institution, especially with regard to rhetoric and activism, operated according to certain logics: electracy and the desire-aesthetics of the Third Sophistic, with both as intimately related.^{6} Electracy, as coined by Gregory Ulmer, denotes the apparatus shift from literacy to a new metaphysics of rhetoric and understanding: alphabetic print : literacy :: digital media : electracy (Ulmer 2009). The logic of electracy, however, precedes digital media as we understand it (the internet), and perhaps begins with the public rhetoric of television, as Marshall McLuhan has argued (see: McLuhan and Fiore’s *The Medium is the Massage*).^{7} Maybe even radio, one could reasonably argue. This nonetheless gestures to a rhetoric/writing of mass, public appeal, of the appropriation and deployment of ideology. The productive goal of electracy rhetoric, then, is not to produce commercials but to appropriate the strategy of such in the service of well-being; not to be a celebrity but to replicate the logic of such; not to advance conceptions of right/wrong (ethics) or true/false (*episteme/logos*) but to promote desire-aesthetics (pleasure/pain) via entertainment. In short, ideology could not be resisted; it had to be refigured and re-deployed rhetorically. It had to be reappropriated. We had to move from the hermetic, isolated scholar of contemplative thought to the collective, public sphere where action takes form. Activism has always understood this public aspect of effective rhetoric/writing: persuasion relies upon appeal (attraction) rather than truth (*episteme/logos*) or force (coercion). The first Sophists’ understood such. Sarah Arroyo and Diane Davis, for example, both provide theoretical and pedagogical approaches to electracy and third sophistic activist and public rhetoric/writing, specifically through the use of video production and humor.^{8} Thus, the rhetorical goal was classical and contemporary, theoretical and practical, even and especially for activist ends: what (per)*suasive* force might we calibrate within and through the digital institution, for those receiving and consuming through the same medium?

Yet the theoretical analysis of such a problematic is one thing, even if productive and generative; the practical, pedagogical application of such is another. After all, any sincere pedagogical subscription to world-classroom contingency would provide an application of analysis, an element of rhetorical production and invention. And what better medium than online spaces? The final assignment was simple enough: in small groups, collaboratively draw from the public, activist rhetoric/writing strategies we have analyzed and, using the affordances of digital spaces (websites, hashtags, blogs, viral videos, etc.), defend and promote a specific issue.

Public Rhetoric/Writing and the Law

The final project assignment detailed in the previous section sought to practically apply public, activist rhetoric/writing in a contemporary manner, with several principles in mind: collaboration, public engagement, and use of new media. As activism almost always forms by way of groups and organizations, activists have to collaborate and reach consensus. This produces a certain *meta-rhetoric*—a rhetorical exchange regarding how the rhetoric for mass, public

consumption will be invented and delivered. A failure of this meta-rhetoric can, as Philip C. Wander notes, “cripple ... factions within and among ... movements” (Wander 2011, xiv).^[9] Public visibility and positive reception from the general, public audience is crucial to any effective activist rhetoric/writing. When it comes to the public dimension of activist rhetoric/writing, poetics and style often trump logic and content: how the rhetoric is delivered to the public is as important as what it says. To this end, following electracy and the Third Sophistic, the fundamentally public character of the internet must be taken into rhetorical account when using new media as one’s activist medium and platform. The gross spatial expansion of (potential) public audience, as afforded by the internet, allows activist rhetoric/writing to reach more people, much quicker, and far more conveniently. Yet effective rhetorical strategies also shift with the move to an electrated apparatus: brevity, or what Ulmer calls “Flash Reason,” replaces contemplative rhetoric (Vine videos, memes, hashtags, gifs) (Ulmer 2012); the logic of celebrity exceeds intellectual credentials (as evidenced by the increased attention given to celebrities regarding political issues, as well as recent elections); entertainment, wit, and humor (desire-aesthetics) have far more rhetorical virality and suasive force than dense reflections on truth and ethics.

One group of students executed this assignment quite effectively. The group developed a hashtag and produced a website in opposition to fur clothing. (We are omitting the hashtag name and website address for the protection of the students, for reasons that will become clear momentarily). The hashtag was used for the rhetorical production of clever tweets and Facebook status updates, and as a means to direct people to their website, which contained more detailed, statistical information on, and argumentation against, fur clothing. On the website, however, the students included pictures of them spray-painting the hashtag on public walls and buildings around campus.^[10]

Upon seeing these pictures on the website, Scott was riddled with competing questions regarding pedagogical ethics, and his answers to these questions continue to change, continue to produce an internal dialogue to which there is likely no definitive answer. First, the students clearly exploited the potential of public rhetoric/writing in two ways—the marking of public, physical places, and the public representation of such in digital spaces. Second, we had spent considerable time on civil disobedience, on the rhetorical function of breaking the law, particularly when in the service of virtue and well-being. Scott had not anticipated that any of the groups would use civil disobedience as a public rhetoric/writing tactic—though perhaps he should have—and yet even if he had, should he have forbidden such a tactic? If such a tactic had been forbidden, would this not limit the potency and legitimacy of that tactic in general? Moreover, he worried whether he implicitly or indirectly gave the impression that such a tactic was acceptable or encouraged—and even if so, was this inherently wrong?

Scott has since realized that many of these concerns regarding pedagogical ethics and civil disobedience (via public rhetoric/writing) are actually quite selfish. First, there is the concern of “getting into trouble,” losing one’s job or even future in academia. M.J. Braun recognizes that, especially for untenured instructors, “The US university, long touted as embodying the democratic principles of academic freedom and the free exchange of ideas, can be a dangerous place indeed for a rhetorician to teach and practice the political arts of democracy” (137). This is particularly true for untenured professors whose students are publicly breaking the law as means to complete an assignment. Indeed, the *public* element of this group’s project is essential to understand. As we have noted above, the spatio-temporal conditions of the internet, and the ubiquitous surveillance state it thus unfolds, allows the digital-public representation of their physical-public civil disobedience available to any and all and forever.

Forgotten in the endless litany of questions regarding the instructor’s responsibility as a pedagogue (and sense of job security), however, is the serious question of a student’s own agency. Braun argues that U.S. universities have “prevented students from developing a civic identity” (138). As college and university pedagogues, we too often forget that our students are not children but adults, and that a productive development of civic identity requires students to make difficult choices. This is especially the case in the teaching of public, activist rhetoric/writing, particularly if we want students to authentically apply the practice of such to their own lives. Civil disobedience is a question of rhetoric, the public, and the law; the appropriate answer to such a question is forever suspended and enshrouded in competing notions of ethics and virtue. But world-classroom contingency as a pedagogical method or learning outcome remains entirely artificial and arbitrary if we do not actually allow students to engage the world.

While the assignment did not encourage, advocate, or condone civil disobedience, and while such civil disobedience was not anticipated, the assignment also did not explicitly (or even implicitly) forbid. What constitutes a “reasonable” form of activism is a fluid question, one that is context-specific. For example, we cannot teach the historical merits of civil disobedience in the Sixties (be it civil rights, the Free Speech Movement, or anti-war activism) only to then instruct students that such forms of activism—for *them* and *their own* generational, local, or identity issues—are unreasonable. What we must teach, however, is the deliberative and critical consideration of the myriad rhetorical acts available, the risks and rewards of various activist strategies, and the contextual exigency of a given situation. The pedagogical goal is not to encourage a certain rhetorical position or action; rather, the goal is to provide the critical apparatus necessary for adopting an informed rhetorical position and for enacting an appropriate action. The

failure of the assignment (and perhaps the course) might have been that, while tasking students with the charge of translating an otherwise course-vacuumed rhetoric into activist action into the public writ large, students still operated under the assumption that course assignments, even when extended into the public domain, were protected—that the classroom-world contingency still yet does not exist. The failure then, perhaps, was that the reality of civil disobedience they read about and saw on screen did not translate to their own lives. They felt somehow removed from the often violent, punitive, and at times life-altering consequences of such methods. That is, if you break the law, you might get beaten or abused, fined or put in prison, expelled from school or have job opportunities diminished, etc. (and thus: is the rhetorical act worth it?). But such is not a failure of civil disobedience, per se; such is a pedagogical and institutional failure, and one upon which we must improve. If we take seriously the task of rhetoric and/as activism, then we cannot treat or teach students as though they are fleeting, momentary blips in a particular semester's course load and responsibility. Specific to rhetoric and/as activism, if we expect students to translate learned skills beyond the given classroom, then our pedagogies need to extend beyond such, also.

Nonetheless, the assignment and the group's project provided teachable moments—pedagogical ones for Scott and rhetorical ones for the students. The rhetorical efficacy of the physical-public rhetoric/writing aside (the actual spray-painting), there seemed little worth in the risk presented by the group's representation of such in the digital-public realm (the photos posted on the website). And it was the digital-public representation that put both the instructor and the group at risk. Yet the group likely only placed the pictures on the website so as to demonstrate to the instructor what they had actually done. As such, the pictures should have been submitted to the instructor via a non-public medium. Of course, this indicates that public, activist rhetoric/writing and the pedagogical concept of world-classroom contingency retains a certain tension and limitations. In other words, public rhetoric/writing and subversive, law-breaking activism come into conflict when the two converge in the world but have to nonetheless be submitted to an instructor for review. That is, subversive, law-breaking acts of public rhetoric/writing are often only effective if there is no trail of such.

Course Two: Student Activism in Theory and Practice

Like the course discussed above, the second course discussed in this article asked students to analyze activist rhetoric and then to create activist rhetoric themselves. Unlike the previous course, however, this course put on a university-sanctioned event. Thus while still following the Ancient Greek concept of *paideia*, this course did so with more specific and directed rhetorical demands. The learning outcomes of the class included both improved writing skills and improved citizenship. Offered each fall, the 400-level course asked students to organize a campus-sanctioned Take Back The Night (TBTN) event which consisted of a resource fair, rally, and march.^[11] Taught at a mid-size state university in the Midwest and housed within the Gender Studies program, the course met a writing-intensive requirement within the general education program. It was also a required course for the Civic Leadership Minor. The course enrolled 45 students from all over the university and focused on both gendered violence and student activism. Students wrote documents for a community partner (a local domestic violence shelter) as well as a variety of texts for TBTN. This section explores the issues that arose when public writing became personal and considers how public writing courses can blur the lines between teacher and students in challenging and even problematic ways.

The course was listed in the catalog as “Student Activism in Theory and Practice,” so students were aware of the activist component when they registered. Despite the obvious focus on activism, Katherine felt the additional focus on gendered violence required a serious discussion on the first day of class. This discussion made students aware of the challenging, even disturbing, course content, introduced them to their community partner, and discussed the course requirement of hosting TBTN. This discussion provided students with plenty of time to withdraw from the course if they were uncomfortable practicing activism or discussing gendered violence.

In order to help students understand the realities of both activism and gendered violence, students read Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *We Should All Be Feminists*, Howard Zinn's *You Can't Be Neutral on a Moving Train*, Jon Krakauer's *Missoula*, selections from Audre Lorde's *Sister Outsider*, and other texts about activism and gendered violence. Throughout the semester, a variety of guest speakers came to class to discuss both gendered violence and activism with the students. These speakers varied from survivors of domestic abuse to local activists to a political activist who was arrested along with hundreds of other activists at RNC 2008.^[12] While the survivor inspired students to care about the event they were organizing, the activist speaker warned the students about the realities of activist work. Zinn's book also discussed being arrested by the police and fired from his job as a result of activism. As the instructor, Katherine felt this balance was important, as while she believes activism is a positive force for social change, she also knows that being an activist can mean facing resistance if not retaliation.

Recognizing that writing teachers “must work to create spaces where audiences do exist and where student writing

has importance and potential consequences” (Weisser 47), the course partnered with a local domestic violence coalition that runs a shelter for survivors of domestic abuse and provides a number of other services for victims of sexual assault and domestic abuse. While the main goal of working with a community partner was to provide students with an opportunity for public writing, this partnership also helped students understand TBTN as an event with connections beyond the campus community and it allowed students to have conversations with activists that spend their lives combating gendered violence.

In order to prepare students for public writing, they wrote a rhetorical analysis of a specific instance of activist rhetoric. After writing this traditional essay, students began the process of public writing. Our community partner identified a variety of writing tasks students could complete for them. These tasks ranged from creating a Twitter account and posting daily to creating a number of awareness brochures about different types of gendered violence to composing a research paper on sexual assault in prisons. Due to the large class size, there were not enough projects for all of the students even if some worked collaboratively. As a result, Katherine created a Do It Yourself (DIY) Activist Writing Project. For this project, students could either write for the community partner or write something for TBTN. About half of the class ended up writing for the community partner while the other half wrote for TBTN. The DIY projects for TBTN lacked the clear rhetorical situation the community partner provided. Students had to identify a space and time when they could deliver their public writing (either via speech, text, or media). Two students created Slam Poems that they performed at the event. Another student created a video that was spread on social media in order to increase awareness of gendered violence and encourage event attendance. Others wrote speeches for the TBTN rally and others still created educational materials to hand out before the rally.

Unforeseen Risks of Public Writing about Gendered Violence

The community partnership, guest speakers, and course readings inspired ten students to compose and publicly share narratives of their experiences with gendered violence as part of their DIY Writing Assignment. Like Bacon, the instructor found that her students “were not writing just to satisfy their teacher or to earn a grade. They had come to care deeply ... They were functioning not as students but as writers” (42). While these narratives had a positive impact on the campus community, two problematic situations also occurred as a result of the personal becoming public. When personal writing becomes a part of students’ public writing assignments, the instructor cannot control how the audience or writer reacts to the personal becoming public. While the University, community partner, and students all felt the event was a success (hundreds of people attended, money was raised, people were inspired, etc.), Katherine couldn’t help but question her responsibility to protect the two students discussed below. As the barriers crumbled, had she put the activism before the students? Can (and should) a course that encourages activist rhetoric and writing protect students from the dangerous realities of activism especially when they are publicly writing about personal experiences?

Rather than provide written feedback (as she normally does with drafts), Katherine met privately with the students that wrote about their experiences with gendered violence.^{13} While her typical draft feedback includes formative suggestions, she resisted that urge during these meetings in favor of asking questions, being particularly careful not to push students in a direction that may make them uncomfortable. Instead, she asked them questions about their goals, about what they wanted their audience to learn from their writing, and even about things she did not understand. After the content was finalized, she again used questions to help students make decisions about tone and voice. For example, when a student wrote about his teenage sister being assaulted and the high school dismissing her complaints, Katherine asked the student “How did you feel when this happened? Sad, angry, helpless?” When the student responded that he felt angry, she then asked if he wanted his writing to portray that anger and gave him word recommendations to make his anger apparent to the audience. She also frequently made it clear that the students could back out at any time without any repercussions for their grade. If they chose to do so, then they would work together to come up with an alternative assignment.

While class discussions and guest speakers warned students about the risks of activism and activist writing, the reality of public writing (and in this case public speaking) is that instructors can never foresee all of the ways such writing might impact the writer and/or the audience. In *Moving Beyond Academic Discourse: Composition Studies and the Public Sphere*, Christian R. Weisser explains, “bringing about progressive societal change is not easy for intellectuals—or for anyone else for that matter. It is quite difficult to enter into public debate in nearly any form, and intellectuals are no better equipped to deal with the complex array of forces in the public sphere than are other members of society” (118). While it is certainly not easy for anyone to enter public debate, it is especially difficult for students to do so, even if (or maybe especially when) their audience is their campus and not necessarily the larger public. While reading *Missoula*, students learned about the backlash rape victims often face when publicly accusing their rapists. That said, when students from this class chose to speak publicly about their experiences with gendered violence, they were not naming their rapists or abusers or accusing them under the law, so they may have felt they didn’t have to fear the kind of backlash the *Missoula* women experienced. While in most cases this was true, one

woman in the class faced backlash when she made her DIY project a personal account of the aftermath of her rape and another feared backlash even though it didn't materialize.

Students Facing Backlash

Anna was assaulted on another campus during her first year of college. ^[14] She later created a campus group for survivors and was, therefore, a natural fit for TBTN's main speaker. In her speech, Anna publicly recounted waking up confused about the bruises on her body and eventually going to the hospital to learn she had rohypnol (a drug commonly used for date rape) in her system. She further recounted the aftermath with her less-than supportive sorority. She explained that she petitioned her sorority to let her move out of the sorority house because her assault made her uncomfortable with the sorority's frequent, late-night male visitors. The sorority refused her request, claiming they couldn't let sisters move out just because of a personal problem. Due to their refusal, Anna quit the sorority and her friendship with many of the sisters ended. Her speech was intended to teach people about the aftermath of sexual assault—about the fear, anxiety, and depression that can follow. She additionally hoped that her story would help students who might need to be there for a friend who was assaulted. She thought that if she explained how the issue with her sorority exacerbated the trauma of her assault, then the audience might be more equipped to support their friends if they were assaulted.

The week before the event, Anna learned that someone in the class had told her old sorority that her speech criticized them. Despite this, she still wanted to give her speech. At the event, she stunned the audience with her bravery and was met with tears and a standing ovation. Unfortunately, not everyone was awed by Anna's speech. Multiple members of her old sorority came to the event and stormed out while talking loudly during Anna's speech. During and after the speech, Anna was unbothered by their behavior, but Katherine did begin to question her ethical responsibility to Anna. Had she risked Anna's emotional stability in order to have an effect on the campus community? Did she have any right to ask her to speak publicly about such a personal event? While these questions still haunt her, Anna later spoke with the local news about the University's response to sexual assaults on campus, discussed the problematic sexual assault training the University implemented with the student newspaper, and organized a weeklong consent event on campus. She continues to be an advocate for survivors, never shying from an opportunity to speak or write publicly about her experiences and what she believes should change on campuses across the country.

While Katherine's initial inclination was to protect Anna from the reaction to her public writing, further reflection led her to wonder if that inclination was problematic. As an adult with agency, Anna made the decision to speak publicly about her assault. The instructor's role was to support her and help her develop as a public speaker and writer. While teachers should be careful not to pressure students into speaking publicly about personal experiences, teachers should also be willing to get out of the way when students decide to do so. If the goal of the humanities and a rhetorical education is effective citizenship, then teachers need to be prepared to accept the form of citizenship a student chooses. If students are writing for and speaking to real audiences, then they will also face real reactions and consequences. When courses allow students to choose the genre and audience of their activist writing, instructors must be willing not only to relinquish control of their classroom but also control of the writing product and how it is received. When classroom writing becomes real, it has a life of its own, and all an instructor can do is prepare students for that reality and support them when their writing starts doing work in the world.

Students Facing Fear

That said, not all students are ready to make their personal writing public. During another part of the rally, a number of students chose to share their history with gendered violence during TBTN. To do this, the students each wrote a brief summary of their experiences as part of their DIY assignment. These vignettes dealt with diverse experiences touching on incest, domestic abuse, and sexual assault. For the performance, the survivors were paired with another student from class who read their vignette while the survivor stood in the middle of the stage with an X taped over their mouth. After all of the vignettes were read, the survivors returned to the stage, tore the tape off of their mouths, and shouted "Silent No More" together. It was a beautiful and moving part of the event that emphasized the prevalence of gendered violence on campus and in our community while empowering survivors both on the stage and in the audience.

Katherine helped students edit and revise their vignettes, but she did not sense any resistance during those meetings. Yet an hour before the event, Jamie (who had written a vignette) was missing for the final dress rehearsal. She arrived right before the rally started, but because the instructor was busy dealing with reporters and last minute details she did not get a chance to talk to Jamie before the rally. When they did speak after the rally, the student appeared intoxicated. During this conversation, she mentioned that was "scared she was going to get shot." The man

who raped her was an athlete, and most of the student athletes attended the rally at the behest of the Athletic Department. While the perpetrator was caught and kicked out of the University, Jamie was scared his friends would retaliate.

Public writing courses, especially those that focus on and engage with activism, force instructors to break down barriers, giving up the control they normally have over the classroom and even over writing assignments. While this more commonly leads to a mix of frustration and excitement as well as lots of work, in this case it led to a student experiencing very intense fear. While most classes (even those that engage in public writing) will not deal with topics like sexual assault, public writing courses face an extra challenge when the personal intersects with the public and students choose to draw on their personal experiences while composing publicly. While Katherine made a conscious effort not to pressure students into writing or speaking about their experiences, the reality is that this student still may have felt pressured by her classmates or the instructor to take part in the performance. When activism is involved in a public writing course, the passion that allows students to act as writers rather than students and makes these classes rewarding both educationally and emotionally can also become an oppressive force: a force that may convince a student to do something they are not yet ready to do.

Whether the student was hesitant to share her story throughout the process or only when the event approached is not clear. In her meetings with Katherine, the student did not appear scared or unwilling, but that does not mean she wasn't. When a class puts on a public event and students compose public writing, instructors can become overwhelmed and students can slip through the cracks. Further, while Katherine still feels the warnings about possible repercussions were important, they may have fostered the fear this student felt. Perhaps the instructor's desire to warn students about the risks of public writing helped create fear when fear was not necessary. When students share personal stories publicly, those stories may put them at risk in ways that neither they nor the instructor can foresee, and if courses incorporate activism with opportunities for personal and public writing, problematic situations such as these might be unavoidable. Yet it is important to remember that this situation is not the norm, and most students were empowered by publicly writing about their experiences.

Messy courses like the one described above present writing as it is: complicated, uncontrollable, and meaningful. Students get to see that writing happens with many collaborators and for many purposes, and they get to learn that writing can make a difference in both their lives and the world. These two examples, however, illustrate the risks and pitfalls of public, activist writing, particularly when the personal becomes public. Instructors cannot protect their students from the realities of public writing unless they make sure students avoid hard topics. Yet these hard topics make courses invaluable to students, and the students in this course learned a great deal about writing, activism, and citizenship. Had the class size been smaller (25 students or less), the second situation here likely could have been avoided. Indeed, while Katherine did not have the power to change the course cap for this course, she will not teach a public writing course with this many students again, especially if personal writing is involved. Service-learning and public writing courses already require an instructor's willingness to give up control, but there is such a thing as giving up too much control. Working with a community partner, putting on a campus event for hundreds of students and faculty, and still meeting the course learning requirements meant that this instructor did not give at least one student (and her writing) the attention and support she required.

The Necessity of Activist Pedagogy

As the two courses discussed above suggest, asking students to write publicly with activist intent increases the risks of public writing. As we both reflected on our courses and shared them here, we felt unsure about the decisions we made (and insecure about sharing them publicly, ironically enough). Yet the more we reflected, the more we realized that this is likely the nature of courses that focus on activism and public writing. While our tendency as teachers is to tie courses into neat bows and move on when the semester is over, activist courses do not offer that security. They inspire you; they haunt you. They force you to question your pedagogy and your relationship with your students. They, like activism in general, force teachers and students to live with contradictions, complications, and complexities. Yet under all this uncertainty remains the fact that there is no better way to produce effective citizens than to practice citizenship within authentic rhetorical situations. There is no better way to find your voice than to work with and for others and write about subjects that matter.

Giving students options and choice are particularly important in such courses, as students will not learn as much if they are forced to write about a political topic they cannot get behind (citizenship requires interest in democracy, and we can't all be inspired or concerned about the same thing). In both courses, we as the instructors allowed students to choose what they would write even though the topic was somewhat limited in the second course. Providing students with some choice is essential to activist writing course success. Since students had a variety of options, none complained about being forced to write for the public. Instead, the opportunity to write for the public inspired

students to rhetorically act in ways neither of us would have foreseen or imagined.

While there are many reasons to incorporate public writing into courses, these two courses chose to incorporate activist public writing for different reasons. The first course focused on activism because rhetoric remains the primary delivery system of activism, and because activist rhetoric/writing necessarily entails public rhetoric/writing. The second course did so because it was a writing-intensive course that also functioned as part of an ethics and engagement minor. This activist focus allowed students to create public writing when community partners were either not realistic or did not have enough projects for all of the students in the course. When students fully embraced the courses' focus on activism, they faced the consequences that activists often face: backlash, law-breaking, and fear. While both of us as instructors attempted to warn students about the risks associated with activism, the freedom of the assignments in both courses allowed students to make the assignment their own, leading to the problematic situations discussed above. While we could limit student choices or eliminate personal writing options, doing so would make the assignment more like the traditional essays composition courses normally assign—limiting the benefits that lead instructors to design public writing courses in the first place.

These courses taught us, as rhetoric and writing pedagogues, that today's university student is not "deoedipalized," as Thomas Rickert suggests or, following Arroyo's treatment of Rickert's position, "apathetic ... toward politics, civic engagement, and varying forms of activism" (Rickert; Arroyo 33). Students have the same potential and capacity for public engagement and activism as ever—to actualize and deploy this potential and capacity, however, requires the facilitation and development of a critical and rhetorical attunement with and to the world. In a society where "fake news" is used to both distribute false information and to dismiss reliable journalism, rhetorical pedagogues must help students cultivate a sense of civic identity while also respecting the agency and autonomy of students. Activist rhetoric and writing provides a practical avenue for this endeavor, even if this means significant risk. Indeed, we cannot divorce rhetoric from ethics, politics, or ideology; pretending we can is a more egregious pedagogical failure than the failures outlined in this article. As activist rhetoric and public writing entail a constant remediation of Edward Corbett's "closed/open fist" metaphor, educators perhaps need to act a bit more dangerously (Corbett).

The recent shift in political climate in the United States has led to an increased visibility of activist and public rhetoric and writing. Yet visibility isn't enough. If, as Byron Hawk claims, "public writing is physical, visual, musical, and sloganeering," then we need more bodies and greater more artistic material enactments of writing. We need louder, better-designed chants (Hawk). Activist courses allow students to practice civic and rhetorical engagement. To merely teach activist and public rhetoric and writing analytically is one thing; to teach and further promote the application of such is another thing entirely. "The public" does not see what we do in our classrooms, but they can see the practical application of what we produce in our classrooms for the public arena, as performed by civic-minded and engaged students. In this moment in history, when all forms of education in the United States are under attack, public writing courses can show the public what we can do and illustrate the worth (the necessity even) of a civic education.

It is no longer enough to teach students how (rather than what) to think. As scholars of rhetoric and writing, we must also teach them how to *act* rhetorically. We must teach our students how to successfully convey their thoughts to both receptive and hostile audiences. We must teach them to listen and respond to those with whom they may rhetorically disagree. We must teach them how to write and speak for the public. We must teach them that words—*their words*—have power and can promote change. If that means taking risks, then we accept the risks. The risks of our own and our students' silence and inaction, the risks of our failure to help students become engaged and rhetorically-savvy participants in civic society, and the risks of a generation so bombarded with rhetoric that they feel incapable of producing their own far outweigh the risks activist courses present. Perhaps what we should fear the most, as teachers and scholars of rhetoric, is the arrestment of rhetorical possibility—the end of rhetoric as a necessary part of our society.

Notes

1. Electracy, as coined by Gregory Ulmer, is a concept that posits that the "digital turn" is significant enough to warrant the designation of an apparatus shift, much as we moved from orality to literacy. Of course, with such an apparatus shift comes not just a new and different mode or method of communication but an entirely new metaphysical orientation to and with the world. Yet just as literacy did not negate orality, electracy does not negate literacy. Rather, electracy merely contends that our sense of the "world" has radically shifted—not just what we know but how we know it, that is, what we value. In short, "alphabetic print : literacy :: digital media : electracy (Ulmer 2012). ([Return to text.](#))
2. Although rhetoric has always been public (by extension, political, ethical, ideological), ubiquitous computing

(ubicomputing) has, in turn, rendered rhetoric (and writing) as more available, accessible, and pervasive, if not ubiquitous itself. The consequences of such a “digital turn” lead us to the qualification of “public rhetoric redoubled.” ([Return to text.](#))

3. By “activism” we mean a deliberative, organized, and *direct* engagement with the *socius* or *polis*. While students often write *about* various issues, such writing (and rhetoric) remains vacuum-sealed within the confines of the classroom, reproducing the notion that there exists some artificial boundary between the classroom and the world outside of it. Thus, this course asked students to rhetorically *enact* and *act upon* what they would otherwise just write *about*. ([Return to text.](#))
4. See Louis Althusser’s “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” (1970), where he not only contends that we are never outside of ideology but that the classroom itself is a principle example of an ideological state apparatus (ISA). Ideology, however, does not necessarily denote a pernicious paradigm of cultural thought and behavior, nor even a dominant one (hegemony). Nonetheless, because of the total circumscription of ideology, which is necessary for seamless subjectification (“interpellation” in Althusser’s terms), ideology becomes a relatively unconscious activity, something taken for granted or matter of fact, even though it is nothing more than a rhetorical construction. As such, the goal of a civic-oriented course on rhetoric is not to *escape* ideology but to become *conscious* of it and to *engage it critically*. See James Berlin’s *Rhetoric and Reality* (1987) for more on the practical dimension of such a goal. ([Return to text.](#))
5. Coca-Cola is rural, traditional, authentic; Pepsi is urban, hip, the future. VW vans are emblematic of a hippie subculture (and all its politics); Ford F-150s are “masculine” vehicles. Easy-Bake Ovens are pink; little boys play with toy guns. ([Return to text.](#))
6. While electracy receives treatment above, the Third Sophistic organizes rhetorical thought non-chronologically, including all thinkers that focus on desire-aesthetics, on the move from *dissoi-logoi* to *dissoi-paralogoi*, or from logocentric determinations of “either/or” to aesthetic conjunctions of the endlessly, excessive, and multiplicative “and” (see: Victor Vitanza’s *Negation, Subjectivity, and the History of Rhetoric*, and Diane Davis’ *Breaking Up [at] Totality*). ([Return to text.](#))
7. Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore’s *The Medium is the Massage* (2001) suggests that “new” media (namely television at the time of its publication) is not only an extension of the “self” but that such media rhetorically focuses on the “self” (the “you”). In other words, it is the medium that changes rhetorically, not the content therein: the medium is the message—or the *massage*, that which *works us over*. ([Return to text.](#))
8. See: Sarah Arroyo’s *Participatory Composition* and Diane Davis’ *Breaking Up [at] Totality*. ([Return to text.](#))
9. As an example, we can gesture towards the difference in rhetorical approach between the non-violence of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Black Panther Party. We can also note the meta-rhetorical differences within the Black Panther Party itself, such as the split between Huey P. Newton and Eldridge Cleaver. ([Return to text.](#))
10. It should be noted that the other groups also presented effective, digital, multi-modal presentations. One group created a blog/website that encouraged dialogue regarding LGBTQ rights and inclusion on campus grounds, and they also used a hashtag to bring that dialogue to the social media arena, namely Twitter. Another group focused on campus safety, particularly sexual assault, and created a live active/inactive database of possible escorts. These groups just didn’t break the law. ([Return to text.](#))
11. Gendered violence continues to be one of the largest issues facing our country and our campuses. In response, activists have long used a variety of tactics to raise awareness and combat rape culture. Events such as Take Back The Night (TBTN) started springing up across the country in the 70s. Since then, TBTN rallies and marches have taken place all over the world. In September 2014, President Obama launched the “It’s On Us” campaign, intending to eliminate college sexual assault. ([Return to text.](#))
12. The speaker was one of approximately 800 people arrested during the RNC 2008 protests, including journalists, though only 15 resulted in criminal charges. The speaker used his experience at the RNC 2008 protests to relay to students the risks, dangers, and rewards of activist (i.e., public) rhetorical engagement. The risks and dangers included arrest, imprisonment, and physical abuse; the rewards included sense of self- and community fulfillment, as well as the ability to promote and even enact political change. ([Return to text.](#))
13. The singular “they” is used here and throughout in order to be inclusive of more than two genders because not all of the students in the class identified as male or female. ([Return to text.](#))

14. All student names have been changed to protect student anonymity. ([Return to text.](#))

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