

## Multimodal Pedagogical Approaches to Public Writing: Digital Media Advocacy and Mundane Texts



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**Abstract:** With the proliferation of digital media and other forms of technologically mediated communication, this article argues that critical multimodal pedagogical approaches to public writing—particularly through interrogating mundane, everyday texts—have the potential to engage students with advocacy and its role in shaping public discourse. In this article, we propose a pedagogy that views multimodal composition as advocacy. Because *all* texts are embedded with advocacy, encouraging students to recognize their own advocacy practices, and teaching them to carefully approach how they construct texts, we argue, may better prepare our students to be more social-justice minded public writers and rhetors in the future.

In recent years social movements of varying scales have been well documented across digital media platforms, heightening a sustained interest in the potentials and constraints for emerging technologies to facilitate public participation and deliberation within rhetoric and writing studies (McVey and Woods; Parks; Portman-Daley; Ryder; Vie). From disseminating live news about international political uprisings, to coordinating events in service of national protests, to rallying collective outcries through hashtags, and to visible expressions of solidarity via Facebook profile pictures in the wake of local and global tragedies, it is clear that digital media are redefining notions of public writing, civic engagement, and advocacy in the twenty-first century. And because many digital, social media platforms are multimodal—combining text, image, moving image, and sound—developing multimodal pedagogical approaches to public writing is crucial if we are to fully realize kairotic responses to the question Susan Wells asked us to consider two decades ago: What do we want from public writing?

That is, what do we want from public writing *right now*—when, according to recent Pew Research Reports, nearly sixty-two percent of adults in the U.S. receive news from social media (Gottfried and Shearer), when going “online” is a continuous activity that holds constrained potential for civic engagement (Smith), when polarization is a dominant feature of current political discourse (Smith, Rainie, Shneiderman, and Himelboim)? Moreover, what do we want our students to be able to *do* with public writing *right now*—when access to communication among college students via mobile technologies such as smartphones and tablets are at an all-time high (Smith, Rainie, and Zickuhr), when pressing social issues affecting young adults such as unemployment and the costs of student debt have reached staggering numbers (Fry), when simply logging online requires confronting and negotiating discursive collisions among publics such as #BlackLivesMatter, #AllLivesMatter, and #BlueLivesMatter, just to name one example?

Building on research in our field concerning the role of digital media in large-scale and public social movements, we turn in this article to the everyday practices with which our students already engage to illustrate the potentials of critically engaged multimodal approaches in allowing them to recognize the ways in which they advocate and how they do it—whether intentionally or not. Specifically, we suggest that teaching multimodal public writing can enable students to explore the ways in which digital media advocacy is composed and recomposed through mundane texts. Such an approach, we argue, can productively draw from the four pedagogical approaches to public writing Susan Wells identified in her seminal article—viewing the classroom as a public sphere, analyzing public discourse, writing for publics, and working with disciplinary public discourses—by allowing students to critically engage their everyday experiences with public discourse, experiences that they may not initially regard as public or with political implications (338-340). In this article, we first illustrate why teaching students to examine their own advocacy practices through their everyday experiences with public discourses in mundane digital media texts (including how they advocate and whether that advocacy is intentional or not) ought to be something we want from public writing. Then, we situate the rationales and motivations that helped shape a pedagogy focusing on multimodal communication as advocacy. In so

doing, we hope to illustrate the potentials of teaching students to recognize and interrogate their own digital media advocacy practices in helping them to develop an array of literacies applicable to any public writing situation.

## What Do We Want From Advocacy?

We choose to focus on the term *advocacy* for a number of reasons. Broadly defined as championing or supporting a particular viewpoint, cause, or policy, advocacy is an inherently rhetorical activity that seeks to constitute and engage publics through discursive processes—whether written, oral, aural, visual, gestural, spatial, or some combination thereof. While often referenced in terms of the systematic efforts of a formal collective to achieve a specific policy goal—such as the advocacy undertaken by non-governmental organizations (NGOs), lobbyists, or activist groups—teacher-scholars in our field have situated advocacy squarely within the purview of public writing as a means of building student capacities for civic engagement, noting that advocacy need not take place in formal organizations post-college but that it is a practice with which students *can* and *should* currently engage.

Although we recognize that advocacy is related to other terms of political action, we hone in on advocacy for many of the same reasons Donna Bickford and Nedra Reynolds pointed out: explicitly labeling and conceptualizing public writing pedagogies as “activist” may cause discomfort for both instructors and students, due in part to its ideological connotations as “radical” and its conflation with other terms like “service,” “charity,” or “volunteerism” (230). Advocacy and activism are certainly related; however, in our view, activism connotes directed and specific action, whereas advocacy simply implies support. Here, we focus on advocacy in order to complicate and interrogate the assumption that its work—supporting or recommending a particular cause or viewpoint—implies a *conscious* choice. With the proliferation of digital texts in our networked contemporary culture, we posit that we don’t often consciously realize what we are supporting or recommending in the texts that we create, share, and circulate, particularly in public digital media spaces. Focusing on the term advocacy rather than activism, thus, allows us to examine more closely the ways in which advocacy is embedded in everyday mundane texts.

Numerous scholars have discussed pedagogical practices that allow students to develop advocate stances and civic dispositions, often through practice with explicitly “public” writing genres such as letters to the editor and op-eds (Gogan; Weisser; Welch; Wells) or via community-based pedagogies such as service learning (Bickford and Reynolds; Coogan; Deans; Herzberg; Morton; Shutz and Gere) and community literacy projects (Higgins, Long, and Flower; Kells; Parks and Goldblatt). Grounding these approaches is the recognition that teaching students to view public writing as social acts with the power to persuade, rally support, or make specific recommendations for the benefit of the public good—all of which involve advocacy—affords them opportunities to learn about and draw from a rich set of literate practices and attend to the shifting dynamics of rhetorical situations. While this particular body of scholarship often emphasizes more formal advocacy practices that occur when writing for and with community publics—after all, advocacy is most typically viewed as “change oriented, and implies an agenda” (Morton 19)—such notions of advocacy also tend to be viewed as unidirectional, with a person, group, or organization advocating for a particular position and, if successful, having a specific effect on a particular audience. Thus, shifting the conversation to less formal, everyday advocacy practices allows us to examine the ways in which students’ everyday interactions with mundane texts also involve advocacy, underscoring that advocacy is much more complicated and multidirectional. Moreover, advocacy should always attend to the shifting dynamics of who benefits and who does not.

## Advocacy + Multimodality in the Mundane and Everyday

We believe that encouraging students to view multimodal communication as advocacy that does things in the world is especially urgent given the ease and rapidity with which content is created, circulated, and consumed through digital media platforms that facilitate interaction among publics. Media scholars Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green refer to this quality of digital media as *spreadability*, which concerns “the technical resources that make it easier to circulate some kinds of content than others, the economic structures that support or restrict circulation, the attributes of a media text that might appeal to a community’s motivation for sharing material, and the social networks that link people through the exchange of meaningful bytes” (4). Indeed, the spreadability of digital media content across social media networks is directly related to what Jim Ridolfo and Dànielle Nicole DeVoss call *rhetorical velocity*, wherein the ways in which texts may be recomposed by third parties factor into its purpose, with particular attention to the “rapidity at which information is crafted, delivered, recomposed, redelivered, redistributed, etc., across physical and virtual networks and spaces” (n.p.). We need only look to the abundance of web-based meme generators or to the near-instantaneous speed with which hashtags trend, for example, to find evidence for both digital media’s spreadability and rhetorical velocity. Driving the spread and rhetorical velocity of digital content are the cultural values of both online and offline communities, and what we find particularly compelling for multimodal public

writing pedagogy are the ways in which digital media content is often articulated—both explicitly and implicitly—alongside advocacy. For example, popular social media platforms include what we view as built-in “advocacy features” that visibly and publicly champion or support content—“like” on Facebook, “favorite” on Twitter, “upvote” on Reddit—in addition to the advocacy potentials of redistributing content by “sharing,” “retweeting,” and “reposting,” all of which result in a continuous stream of digital media advocacy texts that our students, as digital media users, must learn to critically navigate.

While it might be easy to dismiss these digital advocacy features as meaningless or as mere functions of the capitalist society in which we live, we argue that everyday interactions with multimodal social media and other digital media texts do *much more*. Ethan Zuckerman, director of the Center for Civic Media at MIT, developed the “Cute Cat Theory” of the Internet and digital activism in 2007, acknowledging that while Web 2.0 was created primarily for users to publish and access content for personal enjoyment (such as cute photos of their cats or pornography), the potentials of such “banal” Web 2.0 tools can (and often are) subverted by organizations and interest groups to achieve their goals. Further, a recent study on the use of new media tools by youth finds that even those “involved in nonpolitical, interest-driven activities are more than five times as likely to engage in participatory politics,” and thus, even interest-driven internet tools can potentially lay the foundation for engagement in public discourses (Cohen and Kahne 6). We also argue, however, that there is more to be considered here, as neither the banal tools of Web 2.0 nor the content that is generated and circulated by them are neutral (Selfe and Selfe). Advocacy is always embedded within these personal, everyday, mundane texts.

To illustrate our point, a critically engaged analysis of a cute cat meme reveals that even this type of seemingly innocuous meme is, of course, embedded with cultural ideological values—Western ones at that (see [Figure 1](#)).



**Figure 1.** Example of a "cute" meme

While a cat meme might be viewed as sweet, cute, or even humorous to those in the U.S. and in the West, where cats are typically beloved house pets, the same meme might not have the same value for other cultures. The idea that "cat = pet that is cherished and adored" is not, in fact, a universal value as there are cultures outside of Western society that view cats as nuisances or even, in some cases, food. In such instances, "cute" would not be the appropriate descriptor for cat memes, nor would the "cute cat meme" be successful or result in widespread circulation. To be clear, we are not arguing that the advocacy enacted through these everyday mundane texts is *inherently* good or bad, but that there *are* effects generated by them. Liking, sharing, or reposting a cute cat meme does result in *advocating specific values and ideologies* (regardless of whether the individual agrees with those values) and results in something (in this case, the reinforcement of Western values that cats are cute house pets). It is *this* particular point that we believe is crucial for our students to acknowledge in order for them to begin to recognize their own agency and responsibility as public rhetors.

Moreover, memes are not always as seemingly innocent as the cute cat meme discussed above. Consider, for example, the following meme (see [Figure 2](#)):



**Figure 2.** Seemingly harmless example of a "cute" mouse meme

While some might view this as a harmless, even humorous, meme, we argue that the circulation of a meme such as this enacts advocacy because it reinforces ideologies about language, including stereotypes about the value of particular languages and/or accents which, in turn, normalizes predispositions about language preferences, and thus plays a role in perpetuating language biases.

It is precisely the ubiquity of advocacy features built into digital social media and advocacy texts such as those discussed previously that, in our view, necessitate critical multimodal public writing pedagogies. As Jeffrey Grabill argues in his work on the rhetoric of engagement, there is a tendency to overlook or “miss ... the mundane, the technical, the routine” in the making of public arguments (204). Certainly, the naturalized, seemingly invisible daily composition practices of everyday life—such as communicating to publics through digital media, using the advocacy features of various social media platforms, and circulating advocacy texts—are, for many of our students, mundane and routine. Nathaniel Rivers and Ryan Weber, drawing on Stuart Blythe’s work on ecologies, agency, and mundane artifacts, similarly argue that the formation of publics and rhetorical acts that precipitate social movements are “produced by monumental and mundane texts working in concert” (195). Here, we focus on the everyday mundane acts of multimodal advocacy with which our students already engage in order to emphasize: (1) the awareness that the technologies they use to access mundane multimodal texts are not neutral; (2) the importance of thinking critically when consuming and composing multimodal texts; (3) the recognition of how—through their regular engagement with digital media and multimodal mundane texts—they are always already involved in everyday acts of advocacy as public rhetors and public writers. As we ask our students to consider their everyday seemingly inconsequential digital media advocacy practices, we seek to expand their rhetorical knowledge and develop their potential for more responsible and critically informed engagement with public discourses.

## Course Context and Background

The pedagogy and classroom activities we share in this article were designed to satisfy the teaching internship requirements<sup>[1]</sup> of the PhD program in English Studies at Illinois State University, where Sarah is a doctoral student and Elise is an assistant professor. Due to overlapping research interests and shared commitments to public writing pedagogies, Sarah asked Elise to serve as faculty advisor for the teaching internship and requested to teach multimodal composition<sup>[2]</sup> for the internship course to reflect her scholarly and pedagogical interests in digital rhetorics, public rhetorics, cultural rhetorics, critical digital literacies, and social justice.

During our meetings to discuss Sarah’s plans for the teaching internship, which took place in the spring and summer of 2016, several important conversations were shaping public discourse: nationwide BlackLivesMatter protests, a public health crisis in Flint, Michigan, the ongoing Syrian refugee crisis, and an impending presidential election, to name just a few examples. Because the walls of our classrooms are not impermeable to these larger conversations, we often discussed the ways our teaching can productively impact the ways in which students consume and contribute to public discourse, which ultimately led us to explore advocacy’s role in multimodal compositions in everyday mundane texts.

Recognizing that advocacy is enacted through creating and circulating a variety of texts—and that this advocacy always has effects, whether intentional or not—served as pedagogical impetus for this course design. As such, Sarah approached teaching multimodal composition through this lens as a pedagogical and personal choice that culminated from a variety of factors. The first of these was her prior professional work experience in non-profit advocacy organizations, which provided her with first-hand and intricate knowledge of the ways that various forms of public writing tend to advocate in specific ways and, more importantly, for particular people over others, even if the advocacy was enacted as a result of unintended design or language choices made in the document’s creation. The

effects of this advocacy in mundane texts (such as application forms, program guidelines, and even brochures for services), regardless of intention, has real-life consequences which Sarah experienced and worked to mitigate on behalf of her clients.

For example, in her work at one non-profit housing organization, Sarah encountered a situation where federal grant funding for low-income families had been restricted to a particular set of circumstances that proved difficult when attempting to assist people in her community. In researching the legislation that authorized the funding, it became clear that the funding guidelines were unnecessarily restrictive beyond what was originally intended. However, in preparing an application for the funds (which were certainly intended to assist clients like the ones she was working with), she was unable to articulate how the funds could be used to address a particular family's situation because the funding guidelines required certain information that was not available among the options on the forms provided in the application. Despite multiple phone calls and emails to attempt to remedy the problem, Sarah was unable to negotiate assistance for the family despite knowing that they were exactly the type of candidates for which the funding source was created. Thus, she found herself at what Thomas Miller dubs the crossroads between professional communication and civic social action wherein professional communicators become mere "technicians who can help businesses convey their messages but cannot question how and why those messages have been chosen" (71). The lesson she learned from this experience (and many others like it) was that once forms and policies are created, it is often difficult, if not impossible, for them to be flexibly applied. And, perhaps more importantly, that choices in the design of texts—whether application forms (that ask questions in specific ways and do not allow for answers that do not fit the question) or policies (which are created by writers with the power to use word choices that ultimately affect their interpretations)—have real material consequences in that they enact advocacy for some over others.

In addition to Sarah's previous professional experiences, focusing the course on advocacy also stems from prior teaching experiences where it became increasingly clear that students are not very likely to: (1) consider their digital media writing practices to be writing at all; (2) consider how these writing practices are shaped by the technologies that they use to compose in these spaces; (3) or think much about the impact of their digital media practices beyond whether or not social media posts will affect a future career opportunity. Troubled by the notion that students were not thinking critically about their digital media practices, considering the ways that technologies affect their writing practices in digital spaces, or reflecting on how their practices might have effects beyond their immediate networks, she felt compelled to attempt to create a course design that might succeed at dislodging this complacency.

## **Multimodal Composition as Advocacy: Course Goals and Classroom Activities**

Due to our numerous conversations about advocacy and public writing during the planning stages of the teaching internship and in addition to Sarah's professional experiences, we determined that all assignments and activities should encompass the potentials and constraints of advocating through different forms of public writing in various modes, media, and genres. But, first the question needed to be asked: What exactly does it mean to advocate? During the first few days of the course, students initially determined that advocacy largely means "public support" for something. But, what exactly does "public support" entail? Sarah challenged the class to consider the notion of "public support" broadly, beyond what their initial impressions might be. From there, as a class, they considered the following questions: What is our role in advocacy when we create and interact with texts not just in online and social media spaces, but also in physical ones? And, how is advocacy enacted upon us by texts we encounter? How do we enact advocacy when we interact with texts? Moreover, we also considered how the advocacy enacted in digital spaces might have real material consequences that impact the lives of people beyond our immediate spheres.

Consequently, students were asked to explore advocacy in a variety of ways by: analyzing an assortment of multimodal advocacy texts; reading about multimodality, advocacy, and genres; creating both print-based and audio multimodal texts designed to advocate for specific causes; and creating websites that incorporated various modes to strategically advocate for a cause of their own choosing. Students were also asked to participate in weekly discussion forum posts geared toward providing evidence of their engagement with course concepts, in-class activities, weekly readings, and to reflect on their developing understanding of what it means to advocate.

## **Sample Activities and Assignments**

The following example activities and assignments were created to complicate student conceptions of advocacy. In order to move beyond a view of advocacy as specific, directed action that is unidirectional and takes place in formal settings, these materials were designed to help students recognize the ways that a *variety* of everyday mundane texts advocate (through a variety of modes) and, consequently, promote certain values and enact benefits for some

over others. They were also designed to help students to begin to critically examine their own advocacy practices and to recognize the ways in which they always already advocate for particular positions—perhaps even inadvertently or unconsciously.

### **1) Multimodal Advocacy Textual Analysis**

While many multimodal composition courses ask students to complete an analysis of a text for the ways that various modes—visual, linguistic, aural, spatial, gestural—function within it to achieve specific effects (Arola, Sheppard, Ball 4), this course incorporated a variety of assignments and activities with an added element: to analyze the text for what it might be advocating through its design choices and the subtle cultural or ideological values that they promote or enact. In sum, students were routinely asked to identify the *embedded advocacy* within the multimodal texts that they were analyzing. By using the term embedded advocacy, we seek to connect with Pigg et. al's discussion of the ways that technologies are always already embedded in ideologies and yet still connected to situated local use (94), as well as to engage with Bruce and Hogan's discussion of the way that such technologies tend to become naturalized and, in essence, disappear (270).

As an entry level assignment designed to encourage this type of inquiry, students examined various advertisements and considered how they reinforced gendered stereotypes, heteronormativity, patriotism, materialistic capitalism, ableism, linguistic discrimination, and others, through the visual, gestural, spatial and linguistic features of the texts. In later activities students were asked for written reflections that considered how the various pieces of public writing they engaged with employed multimodal advocacy tactics, and to further reflect on whether or not this advocacy was effective and why. Throughout the semester we analyzed a variety of texts, identifying modes as well as embedded advocacy, while considering the rhetorical effectiveness of the texts for particular audiences. Students were also assigned a major project where they selected a multimodal text to analyze according to these factors, again reflecting on the effectiveness for particular audiences. Analyzing multimodal texts for embedded advocacy allowed students to hone their multimodal rhetorical analysis skills while also fostering a sense of agency by allowing them to consider how design choices advocate, and for whom they advocate, ultimately preparing them to consider their own design practices as they create texts themselves. Being cognizant of the ways that design choices can advocate will help students to be more intentional with their design practices in the future.

### **2) “Reading” for Embedded Advocacy**

Beyond traditional course readings, in this course, “reading” was framed as more complex than simply reading words on a page; after all, as Carey Jewitt notes, reading itself is a multimodal practice (319-22). Reading required students to consider the ways in which texts are constructed by weaving multiple modes together to achieve specific effects, which necessitated inquiry into how various modes are employed, and what Madeleine Sorapure calls “looking in between modes” in order to understand their relationship to each other (n.p.) and to understand the ways that advocacy is enacted in the text. For example, students were assigned readings on the psychology of color and typographic effects. After reading these selections, they could then consider how something as seemingly simple as color or font choice can be strategically used to create particular effects, and were able to engage this reading strategy to further understand the text. During class discussions, we talked extensively about associations and the ways in which images, colors, and symbols are used within texts to create effects, eventually discussing how, in certain combinations, these effects are used to advocate various positions by creating a perception for the reader that promotes or connects to certain existing values or belief systems. By teaching students to read multimodal texts for advocacy, we hoped to foster critical reading skills with an eye toward recognizing how advocacy is enacted through multimodal texts in a variety of ways, beyond the use of words. Specifically, we sought to attune them to recognize the ways that every day, mundane texts—even the ones that seem completely unrelated to an overt cause or call to action—are often actually advocating for something or somebody.

To encourage students to employ this reading strategy, and to critically engage with digital media texts specifically, students were also assigned readings/viewings of various social media texts (such as memes and viral videos) in order to highlight the ways that these texts are embedded with advocacy and the effects that they can produce. One example of this type of reading was a viral video, entitled “Try Not to Cry When You Watch this Baby Hear for the First Time,” which depicts a 9-week old infant who was born with severe hearing loss being fitted with hearing aids, and focuses on the moment when he hears his mother's voice for the first time. [\[3\]](#) Videos such as this (that celebrate medical intervention in restoring sight, hearing, and other physical ailments) are pervasive and popular across the Internet and social media platforms, and provide a unique opportunity to teach students about the power of everyday digital media texts and the advocacy embedded within them, allowing for broader class discussions about how information circulates in digital media settings and its role in forming publics. Moreover, such videos are worthy pedagogical texts because of their potential to reinforce, challenge, or even disrupt beliefs, attending to what Phyllis

Ryder calls the “power of circulation” that plays a key role in contemporary public deliberation by “making things happen by sharing, forwarding, re-tweeting, and getting the words out there” (54).

Sarah used this video (and others like it) as well as accompanying articles<sup>(4)</sup> to encourage students to think more critically about the unintended advocacy that is enacted in digital media spaces. Students, as well as many in the general public, often view these videos as harmless—as “feel good” moments. Students’ initial impressions tended to focus on the affect of the videos, concentrating on the babies or how emotional the videos felt. Sarah then offered her perspective, that some might find these videos problematic for the narratives that they reinforce about people with non-normative bodies or for the way that they advocate, champion even, medical intervention and “fixing” of bodies deemed “less than perfect,” and discussed the language used in the articles accompanying the videos, which also reinforces (and, in turn, advocates for the acceptance of) the narrative that non-normative bodies are somehow deficient and should be fixed. Many students admitted to having only viewed the videos and not actually reading the articles, which led to an interesting discussion about how frequently videos with an accompanying text or items are shared across platforms even though they are not actually read in full.

After discussing the potentials of such videos to reinforce problematic narratives, we also discussed how often people like and share content on digital media without considering what they may be supporting by doing so. Students were then asked to take the time to browse through the recent history of their social media feeds and to consider what they may have been advocating for (inadvertently or not) when they liked, shared, favorited, or retweeted texts. The weekly discussion posts following this in-class activity were telling. Students discussed in-depth how little they had ever considered the effects of their social media activity. Several also wrote about how they had re-watched the videos and read the articles in full, noting that they had never considered how simply retweeting links or reposting something might have a deeper implication or play a larger role in perpetuating belief systems. All in all, student responses to this course material pointed to what Kelly Cargile Cook calls critical literacy, or “the ability to recognize and consider ideological stances and power structures and the willingness to take action to assist those in need” (16). We believe that this type of reading assignment, and the resulting student feedback, provide evidence that critical digital literacies can be fostered by encouraging students to interrogate their own social media and online practices by considering advocacy.

### **3) Creating Multimodal Advocacy Texts**

Three major course projects tasked students with creating public multimodal advocacy texts. All projects included a written component requiring students to identify the genre of the text, its intended audience and rhetorical context, the modes utilized and their desired effects, the intended advocacy of the piece, as well as an explicit discussion of the way that their design choices contributed to the overall advocacy of the text.

First, students were asked to create a multimodal advocacy text in whatever genre that they deemed appropriate for reaching their target audience, with the limitation that the genre had to be something conventionally found in print. It is important to note that Sarah intentionally did not define advocacy for this assignment; students were allowed to consider what they felt the term meant and to choose a topic of their own. In response to this assignment, students created a variety of advocacy texts including posters, flyers, postcards, magazine ads, and even a billboard.

Advocacy topics that the students self-selected to engage with included animal rights, anti-cultural appropriation in the fashion industry, the benefits to mankind from the space program, tax funding for Alzheimer’s research, among many others, revealing a variety of preconceptions of what “advocacy” means and the forms it takes in public writing. Overall, most students selected fairly mainstream topics that already have well-known advocacy campaigns (animal rights, anti-cultural appropriation, etc.) and chose to work in common advocacy genres with which they had previous experience (mailings, billboards, etc.). This served to confirm for us that student preconceptions about advocacy included predetermined ideas about the types of texts in which advocacy is often found, and what it means to advocate in general (in this case, advocacy was understood as creating and distributing a text that was clearly directed at championing a particular cause and/or asking the audience to take a specific action).

To continue complicating students’ preconceptions of what it means to advocate and what types of texts perform advocacy work, the second major project asked students to create an audio advocacy text in a rhetorically appropriate genre. In response to this assignment, students created public service announcements (PSAs), radio commercials, and advertisements for Pandora and Spotify. One student even created a parody commercial designed to be played during a comedy podcast denouncing clown shaming (meant to parallel calls against shaming girls for their clothing choices). The many advocacy topics students explored included promoting mindfulness, the importance of voting (geared toward Millennials), fire-safety during holiday cooking, and community education programs, revealing that student conceptions of advocacy were, while still often geared toward topics and forms traditionally considered to be political or social advocacy and/or activism, beginning to broaden.



In the final project of the course, students were asked to create advocacy websites on a topic of their choice by incorporating everything they learned throughout the semester. After an in-class activity wherein we conducted a genre analysis of well-known national non-profit advocacy organizations' websites such as the People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals ([www.peta.org](http://www.peta.org)), the American Cancer Society ([www.cancer.org](http://www.cancer.org)), the World Wildlife Fund ([www.worldwildlife.org](http://www.worldwildlife.org)) among others, the class determined specific elements that make advocacy sites effective and negotiated the required components of their own advocacy websites. Working with the students to create the project requirements allowed students to showcase their rhetorical genre analysis skills and encouraged a sense of agency and responsibility for the overall assignment. In response to this assignment, students created websites devoted to promoting arts education, donating to Locks of Love, supporting study abroad programs, breaking down myths about feminism, advocating for keeping parks clean, and arguing for the importance of NASA. Interestingly, several of these projects focused on new topics and used approaches that moved beyond a narrow definition of advocacy.

Beyond these major projects, in-class activities often tasked students with creating multimodal advocacy texts in short periods of time. For example, after analyzing memes for embedded values, beliefs, and advocacy through various modes, students were given ten minutes to use a free online meme generator to create a meme in response to a prompt. This activity allowed students to see how quickly and easily social media content can be created and distributed. And, as the meme generating site did not require students to create an account, students were also able to see how simple it is for anyone to create content without being required to identify themselves, adding to earlier classroom conversations about how difficult it can be to determine the sources and credibility of some digital media content.

## Reflecting on Multimodal Advocacy

There were several things that developed during the progression of teaching this class that were unexpected, yet crucial to revealing the potential importance of teaching multimodal composing as advocacy. The first of these certainly seemed kairotic in nature. This course was taught during the fall semester of 2016, which encompassed the height of the highly contentious U.S. presidential election and the ensuing aftermath that took place primarily in public writing forms on the Internet and other digital media spaces. The timing of the class, and the divisive nature of the election itself, allowed for unique opportunities for directly discussing the role of digital content, the effects of rhetorical velocity and spreadability, as well as the role of inadvertent advocacy in public participation and deliberation. Additionally, as the election season ended and reports of fake news (and its potential impacts on the election) were widely circulated, we were able to discuss the importance of critically interrogating sources of digital content. As a whole, the timing of this course led to conversations that, while occasionally difficult to navigate, ultimately led to fruitful discussions about the potential power of public writing in digital and social media spaces.

In addition to the timing of the course, using advocacy as a lens through which to view multimodal composition and permitting students to reflect on what advocacy personally meant to them allowed for the creation of a learning community, wherein all class members learned reciprocally from each other. The students learned from the course theme, prompts, and assignments to consider their role as advocates in the creation and dissemination of public writing in a variety of forms. Many expressed that their conceptions of both advocacy and their roles as advocates, were broadened through the work completed in the class. In particular, many acknowledged that they were reading more critically and beginning to recognize embedded advocacy in a variety of texts (and through a variety of modes). And, many also noted that they were now more conscious of the potential advocacy effects of their own interactions with writing (design choices, circulation of texts on social media, etc.).

Moreover, even though this course was not intended to be focused entirely on social media texts, they were often at the center of our discussions and engaging with them critically played a significant role in fostering student awareness of their agency as public advocates. While it would be easy to speculate on the reasons that these texts became such a critical component to the class (for example, because students are frequently on social media or the fact that the election was in full swing), our conversations about public writing and advocacy regularly returned to discussions of writing in social media spaces. Further, student projects often considered how they could be shared across various social media platforms, which was not something that was requested or assigned, but rather something that the students gravitated toward including in their written discussion of the texts and potential audiences. Many student projects were deliberately created with rhetorical velocity in mind, anticipating the ways that they could (or would) ultimately be shared through social media. This experience points to a larger implication for composition instructors more generally. While social media may not be the focus of a course, it's important to recognize that social media dissemination of public writing is, at this point in time, something that students will often consider, a fact that composition instructors might take note of and consider addressing in their classrooms. But, perhaps more importantly, this experience served to further reinforce our belief that teaching students to critically consider their own every day advocacy practices (which, in this case, meant analyzing their own multimodal digital

and social media practices) can indeed foster a sense of agency as public rhetors.

Another key lesson learned was that students often do not know how to evaluate information on websites or social media for credibility, despite acknowledging that this is where they get most of their information. We admit that we did not expect to have to teach these skills in a course full of juniors and seniors in college; however, in a brief in-class exercise geared toward analyzing websites, it became clear that students may not have been previously taught (or perhaps had forgotten) how to evaluate information on the internet for authorship or credibility. Anecdotally speaking, this experience proved to remind us that including critical interrogation of websites and social media texts is an exercise that should be revisited in a variety of composition classrooms, particularly during this era of “fake news” and “alternative facts.”

Additionally, despite our repeated attempts to foster critical digital literacy with technologies—by asking students to consider the potentials and constraints imposed by various writing technologies (both in terms of digital writing programs and social media, with programs as broadly discussed as Microsoft Word and Tumblr)—there was often still evidence of student resistance to interrogating the actual technologies themselves and what technologies enable them to do. For example, although students could often elaborate on the potentials and constraints of programs and platforms (such as expressing what type of composing action could or could not be undertaken in various versions versus others), students generally seemed resistant to recognizing these potentials and constraints as imposed by the creators of the product itself. We wonder if students resist this interrogation due to the ubiquity of these technologies in their lives, if the fact that the technology itself has become so ubiquitous that it becomes easy for them to inadvertently ignore their effects. Regardless, we contend that there is certainly more work to be done in this vein as the technologies that allow for the creation and distribution of content are also critical to public rhetoric work.

Finally, in student reflections on the course as a whole (which were ungraded and due the last week of class), the majority of students noted that they learned a great deal about thinking critically about their digital media interactions, interrogating the credibility of online and social media information, considering what their design and language choices might advocate for and, perhaps most importantly, that they anticipated using the skills learned in the class regularly in both their personal lives as well as their future careers. This feedback encourages us to think that this pedagogy was generally effective. Perhaps interrogating advocacy through multimodality has the potential to bridge the gap between what Hawisher, Selfe, et. al identified as the “gateways” to technology and the public writing skills we desire from students today.

## **The Future of Public Writing and Digital Multimodal Advocacy**

Admittedly, our initial discussions regarding this pedagogy included more intentional, explicit discussions and in-class analyses of the various social movements happening across the internet and social media platforms in our contemporary moment. After much reflection, however, we acknowledged that pushing too much during such a divisive politically-charged climate (whether or not that is what we would prefer) could potentially alienate students. Instead, we determined that our purpose might be better served by fostering dialogue to gain insight into where students were coming from, while at the same time encouraging them to understand that no matter their political leanings, they were always advocating in their digital media practices. The overarching goal was to help students to recognize the way that this—their personal role in advocacy—translates into other scenarios, including the creation of other types of texts. The proliferation of digital mundane texts in our current moment along with the pedagogy we share here as a case study, points to a changing landscape for public writing—not just in terms of who writes for the public and the ways in which such texts are circulated to publics, but also in the ways in which the creation, consumption, and circulation of public digital media mundane texts are dependent on an array of literacies, literacies that we can and should cultivate and develop in our classrooms. Through implementing this pedagogy, we found that permitting students to more organically identify, define, and engage with advocacy in multimodal texts allowed for a sense of student agency, urgency, and responsibility. Ultimately, what we conclude from this experience is that teaching students to view themselves as always already advocates (intentionally or not), without prescribing to them what this means, allows students to understand that they have a significant role to play in public rhetorics and perhaps, more significantly, in shaping the discourse of the communities that they engage with.

## **Notes**

1. The PhD teaching internship at Illinois State University requires students to work with a faculty advisor as they develop their course, which includes drafting syllabi, assignments, and classroom activities, and then submitting course materials for the faculty advisor’s input and approval. In addition, the faculty advisor also serves in a mentoring role during the students’ teaching of the internship course, which includes regular

- meetings to discuss any pedagogical issues or concerns that may arise, as well as a formal classroom visit to observe the student's teaching of the course. ([Return to text.](#))
2. The official university catalog describes multimodal composition as a “[w]orkshop emphasizing rhetorical analysis and composition of digital texts in a variety of modes including graphics, typography, audio, video, animation” (Illinois State, 162-63), though individual instructors may choose to tailor the course even further based on their teaching and research interests. ([Return to text.](#))
  3. This video has been viewed over 8.6 million times on YouTube alone, liked and shared across countless platforms, and has circulated widely since its original posting in March of 2015. The video can be found at: <http://www.today.com/parents/moving-mother-son-moment-one-baby-hears-first-time-t16631>. ([Return to text.](#))
  4. The following links provide examples of articles accompanying videos of the type discussed here: [www.today.com/parents/moving-mother-son-moment-one-baby-hears-first-time-t16631](http://www.today.com/parents/moving-mother-son-moment-one-baby-hears-first-time-t16631); [www.thethings.com/try-not-to-cry-as-you-watch-this-baby-see-his-mom-for-the-first-time/](http://www.thethings.com/try-not-to-cry-as-you-watch-this-baby-see-his-mom-for-the-first-time/); [www.mtv.com/news/2137255/baby-hearing-for-first-time-video/](http://www.mtv.com/news/2137255/baby-hearing-for-first-time-video/). ([Return to text.](#))

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