Challenging Rhetorics of Adaptation through Creative Maladjustment

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Abstract: The literature on public writing and community literacy has generally focused on *how* to get students to go public in effective and ethical ways. This article instead addresses a prior concern, the problem of *why* to go public. I argue that students (and Americans generally) are immersed within a cultural ecology of civic disengagement that manifests itself through powerful rhetorics of adaptation. These rhetorics encourage people's adaptation to unjust societal conditions rather than activism to change these conditions. Hence, before helping students determine *what kind* of difference they should make, civically engaged writing teachers must help students see that they *can make a difference*. I call on engaged teachers to facilitate opportunities for students to confront, analyze, and challenge rhetorics of adaptation, and in turn, to maladjust creatively to the anti-civic surround by invoking counterhegemonic rhetorics of activism.

> It isn't too complicated to get the principles of equality and justice and love, but to make these things function, you have to trust that people have the capacity to live that way and to achieve that kind of society. This is hard to do, because under present day conditions many people are untrustworthy. They are untrustworthy in a temporary sense. In the potential sense they are trustworthy, so you have to posit trust in spite of the fact that the people you're dealing with don't, on the surface, merit that trust.
> —Myles Horton, *The Long Haul*

Public-writing and community-literacy scholars have addressed various challenges of asking students to engage audiences beyond the classroom, including how to access the public sphere within an increasingly privatized world and how to enable more substantive contact with audiences than writing letters to editors (Weisser; Welch, *Living Room*; Wells). They have also raised concerns about service learning that reinforces students' self-conceptions as altruists to the poor rather than as equal partners in progressive social change (Green; Herzberg; Julier; Welch, "And Now"). In tackling these issues, scholars have focused mostly on the problem of *how* to go public effectively and ethically. I argue, however, that insufficient attention has been placed on the rhetorical forces that deter students' civic engagement in the first place—i.e. the problem of *why* to go public. To help students see a purpose for being civically active *after they leave* our classrooms, we need to understand better why they tend to be civically *in*-active *before they enter* our classrooms. What is holding students back?

Elizabeth Ervin notes that "college writing classes represent many students' introduction to the wide, wide world of 'Issues'" (392), while Nancy Welch points out that when "students, and most of the rest of us, don't care about politics, it's because we've *learned* that it is not our *place* to care" (*Living Room* 122); instead, there is a "select set of people who are credentialed and certified to hold views on the problems of the day, problems much too complex for most of the rest of us to grasp" (135). These observations are certainly part of the answer, but they are components of a broader explanation. Students' difficulties perceiving themselves as civic agents reflect their immersion within a relentless

surround of political quietism that takes shape long before they come to college and that continues to work its influence even as engaged teachers offer alternative perspectives about the importance and viability of civic action. This anti-civic surround manifests itself through powerful discourses—what I call *rhetorics of adaptation*—that truncate entry into the public sphere. The obstacles to young people becoming actively involved in *any* social campaign, let alone a politically progressive one, are manifold and complexly layered. Accordingly, I argue that in the short term, helping students determine *what kind* of difference they should make is less important than helping them see that they *can make a difference*. As exhorted in the epigraph by Myles Horton—legendary educator, community organizer, and founder of the Highlander Folk School—we have to posit *trust* in our students. Therefore, I call on engaged teachers to facilitate opportunities for students to confront, analyze, and challenge rhetorics of adaptation, and in turn, to *maladjust creatively* to the anti-civic surround by invoking counterhegemonic *rhetorics of activism*.

Rhetorics of Adaptation in Student Discourse

In his book *Generation at the Crossroads*, Paul Rogat Loeb argues that from a young age students confront a cultural binary that pits *activism* against *adaptation*. While *activists* believe in the importance of sustained community efforts to redress social injustice, *adapters* accept the uniquely American ideology that the keys to success are individual merit and hard work, that the problems of others do not directly affect them, and that those who help others foolishly throw away their own chance at material success. For Loeb, this binary posits that a financially rewarding occupation is incompatible with promoting social equity, and faced with these mutually exclusive options, most students choose adaptation. Although Loeb's dyad oversimplifies their beliefs and actions, his argument that most students grow up in a culture saturated with narratives that discount the necessity and practicality of civic participation is compelling. I resist the easy categorizing of adapters and activists, but I agree that mainstream ideologies of disengagement impose tremendous adaptive pressures on students. Insofar as they operate through various forms of discourse, I call these pressures *rhetorics of adaptation*.

I have become increasingly interested in such rhetorics—especially their influence on students' civic dispositions—through teaching a course entitled "Community Writing" at multiple institutions over the past several years. This course asks students to think about what civic roles they can and should play in local, national, and global communities, and how they can use writing and rhetoric to advance both their professional goals *and* the goals of communities that matter to them. At the beginning of every term, I give students a survey adapted from Joel Westheimer and Joseph Kahne's designation of three "kinds of citizens": 1. "personally responsible" citizens who believe that to "solve social problems and improve society, citizens must have good character; they must be honest, responsible, and law-abiding members of the community" (240); 2. "participatory citizens" who believe that "citizens must actively participate and take leadership positions within established systems and community structures" (240); and 3. "justice-oriented citizens" who believe that "citizens must question, debate, and change established systems and structures that reproduce patterns of injustice over time" (240). It will probably surprise few that students largely self-identify as personally responsible citizens. Such affiliations complement durable national trends according to which college itself has become valued primarily for the personal advantages it is believed to confer. Derek Bok notes that a substantial increase has occurred since 1970 "in the number of students who look upon making money and succeeding in one's career as primary motivations for going to college" (26), while William Sullivan similarly argues that an ethics of *instrumental individualism*—focused on the private, practical benefits of college—came to dominate the academy following World War Two (21).

In asking students to think about what kinds of citizens they want to be and believe they should be, I frequently encounter rhetorics of adaptation—in surveys, class and online discussions, office hours,

journals, and formal writing—that justify students' decisions to be civically inactive. One of the most consistent themes involves the considerable demands students feel have been placed on them to succeed at high academic levels and to translate these achievements into professional success and material prosperity—and thus to avoid the alternative of continuous financial insecurity. In regard to these pressures—from family, peers, counselors, etc.—Mark Edmundson writes:

> Students worry that taking too many chances with their educations will sabotage their future prospects…. There's a sentiment currently abroad that if you step aside for a moment, to write, to travel, to fall too hard in love, you might lose position permanently. We may be on a conveyor belt, but it's worse down there on the filth-strewn floor. So don't sound off, don't blow your chance. (43)

According to Edmundson, the belt moves forward inexorably, and if students step off for any reason, they believe it will be impossible to get back on later. Thus they adapt to the assumption that they must thrive in college, then (increasingly) in graduate school, and finally in a top-paying job, all while suffering no diversions along the way. The conveyor belt rules out risky behavior such as spending time on activist causes, which students do not perceive as connected to their career paths.

Edmundson, writing from his context as an English professor at the University of Virginia, notes that he most often sees the effects of these pressures on middle- and upper-middle class students, although he confesses to rarely meeting students from poorer backgrounds. However, I have given Edmundson's essay to students in primarily middle-class and primarily working-class institutional settings, and regardless of class background, clear majorities perceive the conveyor belt as applying to their own lives. Julie,{1} [#note1] who attends an urban commuter university where about 40% of students are the first in their family to attend college, describes how the conveyor belt is rhetorically constructed and fortified through constant repetition:

> It's been shoved down our throats by our parents, teachers and occasionally the media, "Get a good education if you want to make it in the world, if you want to be someone, if you want to get out of the ghetto" etc. Because of this the ultimate goal is to get a diploma and on the smaller scale it means taking down the facts that will be on the test so we can memorize it and get an A and forget it to make room for the next test.

In some respects, obstacles to civic engagement may actually be *greater* for working-class students. At my present institution, Florida International University (FIU), responses on a recent National Survey of Student Engagement indicate that approximately 50% of students (twice the national average) spend up to 15 hours a week caring for a family member at home, and about 60% of freshmen spend no time participating in student activities (O'Neill). Most FIU students also work part - or full-time, and thus even those who aspire to be active in extracurricular activities—either on campus or off—face sizeable constraints.

More broadly speaking, in the continuing aftermath of the so-called Great Recession, the anxieties of middle- and working-class students may be merging. Unemployment among people aged 16 to 29 has reached its highest point since World War Two (Parker; Rampell), while real wages have declined for all classes except the wealthiest (Meyerson; Whoriskey). Furthermore, economists like Paul Krugman argue that the widely shared faith in college as the postindustrial gateway to financial wellbeing is increasingly misguided. For Krugman, the job market of the future will "hollow out," meaning that medium-wage jobs associated with the middle class will be replaced by a select few high-paying jobs and a majority of low-paying service jobs. Krugman (see also Anyon) believes that for many students, college degrees may become "no more than tickets to jobs that don't exist or don't pay middle-class wages." In the meantime, the average debt for college graduates has reached well over $20,000 (Lewin). These macroeconomic indicators suggest that students will experience even greater anxiety

in coming years; they may come to perceive the conveyor belt as increasingly narrow and crowded, forcing them to focus even more attentively on academic success lest they be pushed onto the "filth-strewn floor."

For Edmundson, the conveyor belt works in concert with rampant consumerism and its attendant culture of irony to drain the intellectual and creative spirit from students, whom he characterizes as possessing "little fire, little passion" (41), and about whom the best compliment he can muster is that they are "decent" people (42). Students certainly register the pressures of consumerist culture. Anderson, for example, asks, "How is one to be properly motivated to aspire to great things when all one thinks of as the barometer of success is the *acquisition* of great things?" Nevertheless, in their journal responses to Edmundson, many students dismiss his efforts to extrapolate from classroom behavior in order to evaluate their overall psychological states—and I agree with them. Amber writes that students' failures to satisfy Edmundson's desire for passionate intellectual inquiry, or for fervent expostulations of any kind, reflect behaviors necessitated by circumstance rather than character defects. For many, she writes:

> life becomes a routine: school, work, school, work. This is what leads me to believe that students do not lack passion, they simply lack the ability to show it during their everyday routines. They may be passionate about one specific issue or even many things, but they find it hard to put their obligations aside and do something they love.

Chrystia directs the analytic lens back at Edmundson and the largely monologic, anti-participatory make-up of most American classrooms. She writes:

> Did he ever care to think that it might not be the students but his teaching? … I can remember in three classes where speaking up was not acceptable. For example, statistics. Mathematics is a tough subject for most students so one would expect a professor to help and make the material as understandable as possible. In this case, every time and I mean every time a student had a question, the teacher would ignore the student and said he will get to that later. Later never happened because he "taught" each minute of the class.

In this moment of Freirean insight, Chrystia exposes how adaptation is coerced by the institutional structure, according to which students are expected to rehearse and reverberate teacher knowledge rather than to participate collaboratively in mutual inquiry and knowledge production. Edmundson does not address the power institutions have to discourage expressions of passion, choosing instead to critique students' deficits along with tendencies toward ironic detachment in the larger culture. Although acknowledging complicity in this culture—particularly through his begrudging capitulation to the demand for entertaining and easy-to-swallow curricula—he does not examine how his own or other teachers' incapacity or unwillingness to challenge students' supposed apathy *actively* reinforces the atmosphere of cool irony that he condemns. Moreover, aside from calling feebly for renewed celebration of genius in humanistic teaching, he does not speak to possibilities for pedagogical or other means of challenging student adaptation. Explicitly refusing to offer remedies, Edmundson indulges in his own adaptive rhetoric with the observation that "[o]ne can't simply wave a curricular wand and reverse acculturation" (49).

Despite Edmundson's resignation, many students show evidence of resisting rhetorics of adaptation. Chrystia desires to be a teacher who will not pressure students to adapt, but she is unsure that her independent spirit will persevere in the face of her own pressures:

> I hope to be the teacher kids remember throughout their lives. The one that helped them through the school year who was more than just a teacher but an awesome teacher. I want to fill their little lives with memorable moments…. I am a little worried about the system

getting to me and losing my true feelings about education but I suppose it is the children that will get me through. Every year a new set of kids, every year a new chance to inspire them to make a difference in the world.

Chrystia displays a sense of conflict about her impending role. She does not want simply to participate as an obedient worker—one reminiscent of Charlie Chaplin's character from *Modern Times*—situated at one point along her future students' conveyor belts. Yet, while she has not surrendered to this fate, she is unsure how to avoid it. Chrystia's plight demonstrates clearly that, rather than implicitly endorsing adaptation, teachers who want students to express ardor—for learning, for genius, for civic engagement—need to create forums that provide alternative pedagogical experiences and alternative discourses that bolster student consciousness of and resistance to rhetorics of adaptation. For while students (and, for that matter, most of us) tend to employ such rhetorics, civic disaffection is neither preordained nor guaranteed.

Facing the Cultural Ecology of Civic (Dis)-Engagement

In trying to understand the tensions students articulate between their civic and private impulses, I draw on Gail Hawisher and Cynthia Selfe's analytical framework of the *cultural ecology of literacy*. Building on the New Literacy Studies, Hawisher and Selfe argue that "literacy is related in complex ways to existing cultural milieu; educational practices and values; social formations like race, class, and gender; political and economic trends and events; family practices and experiences; and material conditions—among many other factors" (5). Following Hawisher and Selfe, literacy practices cannot be understood apart from the dynamic factors that interrelate in complex ways through the manifestation of these practices. I argue likewise that civic (or anti-civic) practices, which are themselves literacy practices, cannot be understood apart from the cultural ecology in which writing teachers and students live, work, and interact with one another. Troy Murphy similarly contends that citizenship is a rhetorical construct that must "be understood as contingent upon the context in which it is enacted and the manner in which it is articulated and publicized" (193). For Murphy, "Common sense assumptions about what it means to be a citizen are continually reconstructed through prevailing practices of citizenship and the public discourses that explain, highlight, and normatively govern citizens' understandings of those practices within their respective historical moments" (193). Mainstream constructs of citizenship, then, are informed by prevailing ideologies within the cultural ecology, and I argue that within our contemporary ecology, pervasive rhetorics of adaptation frame citizenship as personal responsibility.

Rhetorics of adaptation invoke a privatized, market-driven world of individual rights and responsibilities, as well as the gentle humility of the ideal American citizen. In Althusserian fashion, they interpellate people's adaptation to this dominant cultural narrative, exhorting the belief that self-interest is the best means to promote the common good, and therefore that regular people need not participate actively in civil society. As Kirk Branch notes, "Official definitions of citizenship do not, typically, privilege dissent and activist challenges to governmental and industrial power" (40). Similarly, Murphy analyzes the romantic "ordinary hero" of American democracy, a figure constructed both through political discourse and "a myriad of other forums such as popular books and magazines, local newspapers, media broadcasts and various communities that honor 'hometown heroes' or 'heroes of our community' in locales throughout the country" (199). This "public image of ideal citizenship largely excludes the rhetorical and political dimensions of democratic citizenship" (201), instead reinforcing the narrative that "good citizens" are exemplified by unassuming, apolitical Americans who demonstrate "the characteristics of quiet resolve and reject the path of public complaint" (197). Largely acting alone, ordinary heroes eschew the messy work of political deliberation and collective change.

Rhetorics of adaptation are particularly prevalent in discourses of formal education, as exemplified by what social reproduction theorist Jay MacLeod calls the meritocratic *achievement ideology*. This normative ideology both reinforces mainstream success narratives—i.e. the American Dream mythos—and frames education through the ethical lens of Sullivan's instrumental-individualism. According to MacLeod, teachers endorse the achievement ideology not out of maliciousness— especially when their classrooms are filled with working-class students who are most negatively impacted by this ideology—but sincere pedagogical aims:

> In my experience, most teachers are well-intentioned, hard-working men and women who are striving to do a difficult job as best they can. They parrot the achievement ideology because they think it will motivate students, because it probably does not contradict their own experiences, and because they believe it. Most middle-class Americans do. (262)

Teachers, then, advocate meritocracy because they perceive the world this way. Generally speaking, this set of beliefs makes civic action seem both counter-productive—in terms of personal achievement—and unnecessary. "After all," Theresa Perry sardonically notes, "we live in the post-Civil Rights era. The society is now open" (96-7). Students are exposed early to educational rhetorics of adaptation. Stephen Parks, for instance, observes that when working-class children use personal narratives to portray a "complex view of their communities or to connect their experiences to collective efforts for change," teachers generally move them "toward defining their experiences in very nationalist or individualistic terms" (6). Accordingly, confronting pervasively adaptive rhetorics that accentuate values of personal success, ambition, and accountability, most students come to perceive their "ultimate goal"—in Julie's words—as a college degree and a good job.

Nevertheless, while impactful, rhetorics of adaptation do not inexorably fashion people's dispositions against civic engagement; we are all hailed, but we can refuse to answer. I argue that as scholars of rhetoric and composition, we are uniquely equipped to trace these rhetorics as they circulate through mainstream educational and cultural discourse. Such discursive mapping can contribute to a process of resisting forces of disengagement in the cultural ecology. Of more immediate relevance to my purposes here, however, is the fact that we are also favorably located and equipped as *teachers* of rhetoric, literacy, and writing to understand and perhaps intervene in the manifestation of these rhetorics in student discourse. Engaged writing teachers have already made progress by providing students opportunities to go public on a variety of issues. But considering that rhetorics of adaptation can be found virtually everywhere, it is necessary for pedagogies that more explicitly grapple with their influence. As I demonstrate below, many of the phrases that make up such rhetorics are anti-civic clichés, and it is their familiarity that gives these phrases such persuasive power. Defamiliarizing these phrases can be a way to disrupt the adaptive process, and thus to begin the (slow) work of helping students articulate counterhegemonic *rhetorics of activism*. Toward this end, I urge engaged teachers to use rhetorical analysis and public writing to support students' *creative maladjustment* to the cultural ecology of disengagement.

Creative Maladjustment: Engaging Students in Rhetorics of Activism

My pedagogical interest in *creative maladjustment* was inspired by educational activist Herbert Kohl, who takes the term from a 1967 speech that Martin Luther King, Jr. gave to the American Psychological Association:

> there are some things within our social order to which I am proud to be maladjusted and to which I call upon you to be maladjusted. I never intend to adjust myself to segregation and discrimination. I never intend to adjust myself to mob rule. I never intend to adjust

myself to the tragic effects of the methods of physical violence and to tragic militarism. I
call upon you to be maladjusted to such things. (qtd. in Kohl 129)

For Kohl, creative maladjustment enables individuals who lack institutional authority to fight for their
beliefs without tipping off the establishment. He explains, "When it is impossible to remain in
harmony with one's environment without giving up deeply held moral values, creative maladjustment
becomes a sane alternative to giving up altogether" (130). Kohl narrates multiple experiences
negotiating clashes between his pedagogical objectives and those of institutional superiors. He argues
that creative maladjustment is a context-based process that requires sophisticated analytical and
rhetorical skills:

> It implies adapting your own particular maladjustment to the nature of the social systems
> that you find repressive. It also implies learning how other people are affected by those
> systems, how personal discontent can be appropriately turned into moral and political
> action, and how to speak out about the violence that thoughtless adjustment can cause or
> perpetuate. (130)

My students, particularly those interested in teaching careers, are consistently taken with Kohl's
ethos. They express admiration for his commitment to acting ethically within what Kirk Branch calls
the "moral ambiguity" of institutional experience (189). One of the examples students respond most
vibrantly to concerns Kohl's participation in the deaf power movement of the 1960s. Kohl speaks of
advocating against the demands many schools placed on non-hearing children to participate—i.e. to
adapt—as "normal" members of the speaking world. Typical practices included forbidding students to
sign and forcing them to speak aloud in class, about which Chrystia writes:

> I felt horrible and saddened at that idea. In some sense, it is like being reprimanded for
> speaking. Ignorant hearing/speaking individuals teaching non-hearing students. What
> kind of system is that? … It takes people like Mr. Kohl who are outspoken and
> opinionated, to raise important issues that need to be addressed. Why should someone
> who is just a little different have to conform to what society considers normal?

Some students discuss personal experiences with teachers who creatively maladjusted to institutional
prerogatives. Julie, another prospective teacher, writes about how necessary such teachers are,
especially for the students who haven't already been tagged as elite:

> I was a very bright but lazy student in high school and because of this settled for average
> classes as opposed to AP or honors. During my senior year I regretted it because the
> honors English class had a great teacher that allowed them to dress up and act out scenes
> from Shakespeare and other plays, and there I was copying questions out of a textbook
> with a teacher that barely looked up from his desk. Wouldn't you know it, a new teacher
> came to the school and I got transferred to her class. She was a master at creative
> maladjustment … [;] she found loop holes in the rules so she wouldn't get in trouble
> either. She challenged us, made us write and share our poetry with each other, interact
> with one another. She would bring poetry from her personal collection. And yes, we got
> to act out scenes from plays too. I felt like I was on par with the "smart" kids and it was
> nice to be motivated instead of expecting to fail like my former class. It seems like if you
> aren't bright from the beginning you get dropped and forgotten, you just get busy work
> for all of your education and then gotten rid of at graduation.

The teacher she describes is reminiscent of Jack MacFarland from Mike Rose's book *Lives on the
Boundary*, an equally creative maladjustor who prevented Rose from falling through the pedagogical

cracks of his school. Clearly, creative maladjustment can have a significant impact on a student's development.

Kohl seeks to articulate practical means for working ethically within morally ambiguous institutions, but his concept is also useful for helping students challenge rhetorics of adaptation. Kohl himself briefly discusses the discursive implications of creative maladjustment through his efforts to resist deleterious binaries, such as dividing "youngsters into good/bad, normal/abnormal, intelligent/dumb, and high/low potential" (135). Of course, such a process represents no easy task, and I do not suggest that pedagogies of creative maladjustment will easily wipe away students' years of enculturation to rhetorics such as the conveyor belt to personal success. But they *can* help cultivate the capacity of students, especially those already showing signs of resistance, to *imagine* alternatives to dominant narratives. In doing so, pedagogies of creative maladjustment can help students recognize and begin to employ counterhegemonic *rhetorics of activism* that *encourage* robust civic participation.

In practicing a pedagogy of creative maladjustment, I begin by working to make rhetorics of adaptation overt, thus helping students become more conscious of the civic implications of language. For instance, we examine the either-or logic of Edmundson's conveyor belt metaphor, whether it is invariably true that stepping off will prevent one from stepping back on later. We extend this discussion by creating a list of phrases people use to rationalize *not* acting in response to civic problems. Many of these expressions,{2} [#note2] variations of which the reader has probably heard countless times, are noted by Loeb*:*

> God helps those who help themselves. (11)

> I feel sorry for those who get tough breaks, but we'll always have the poor. (11-2)

> You make your own chances. (12)

> I feel I owe my parents for sending me here. (12)

> I don't want to end up poor. (13)

Students have no trouble filling up the board with such phrases. But then I invert the lesson, asking them to think of phrases that *promote* interventions in the face of injustice—i.e. rhetorics of activism. Typical examples include: "The journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step"; paraphrases of Margaret Mead's remark that small groups of people are the only ones who have ever created significant change; Gandhi's quote that we must be the change we want to see in the world; and, more recently, "Yes we can." Though students manage to call up such phrases, they struggle in this task. Furthermore, because this language is used much less frequently, it often remains attributable to specific speakers, whereas the phrases of adaptation have become so prosaic that their origins have ceased to matter; it is as if they have always been with us. Experiencing this disparity can aid students' recognition that they have encountered rhetorics of adaptation far more consistently. I do not expect students to stop using this language—after all, I regularly catch myself doing so—although I hope they will become more *conscious* of using it. Rather, I want them to see that the language "deck" is stacked heavily toward adaptation. On such an uneven playing field, it is easy to see why adaptation might seem the only logical choice. And yet, not everyone makes this choice.

The course's capstone project asks students to respond collaboratively to an ongoing public issue by engaging audiences beyond the class. Each semester, students choose their own project, designing it from scratch and seeing what they can achieve in six to seven weeks. Projects have ranged from trying to persuade the city council about the need for more streetlights in off-campus neighborhoods, to collecting supplies for local schools or foster homes, to raising awareness about homelessness. As

seen from this list, most projects do not reflect justice-oriented citizenship as detailed by Westheimer and Kahne's "kinds of citizens" list. However, these projects do allow students to experience the grunt work of organizing a public activity from beginning to end, which is most closely associated with participatory citizenship. These projects, then, require greater civic investment than most students are accustomed to performing. Moreover, while I would prefer that students demonstrate a justice orientation through their choices, I refrain from selecting projects and requiring adaptation to my own political principles. This is where Myles Horton's pedagogical value of *trust* becomes most crucial.

I argue that engaged teachers must give students opportunities to experiment with active citizenship—to perceive that it is something they can do, that it can even be fun at times—before we concern ourselves so much with the ideological underpinnings of these practices. I share the fear expressed by other scholars that students may engage public audiences, especially those from underserved communities, in a condescending manner that reflects moralistic self-satisfaction. But if we do not trust their capacity to develop past these attitudes, then we are practicing a similar condescension toward our own students. To expect or demand that they share our political dispositions—to refuse to meet them where they are—is to ensure that many come to feel we are imposing our values on them and to reduce the likelihood that they become allies in justice-oriented civic engagement. Therefore, with trepidation, I accept the risk that the political and social values students express through their initial forays into the public sphere may not resemble, and in some cases may contradict, my own.

One class's capstone project was inspired by the film *Peace One Day*, which chronicles British actor and filmmaker Jeremy Gilley's campaign to make September 21 the United Nations' International Day of Peace (or "Peace Day"). While I have shown this film multiple times, this class was especially taken with the movie's protagonist and message. Students were quite surprised to learn that Gilley's advocacy succeeded—that Peace Day actually has been established—because none of them had ever heard of the day. They were more amazed by the tragic irony that moments before the official ceremony to announce the establishment of Peace Day was scheduled to take place—complete with Kofi Annan ringing a peace bell in front of the UN headquarters—the first plane struck the World Trade Center on the morning of September 11, 2001. Upon consulting classmates, friends, and family members, students learned that their ignorance is widely shared. Therefore, they resolved to raise campus awareness that Peace Day exists. As a case study, this project illustrates many of the tensions students struggle to negotiate between their desires to be more civically active and the inertial forces of disengagement, particularly the pressure to do what is necessary to get an "A" and to continue along the conveyor belt. I demonstrate below that although this project cannot be described as having produced a straightforward "happy ending," neither did it represent failure.

Furthermore, the specific projects students carry out are Hitchcockian MacGuffins; I am less interested in building streetlights or convincing people to celebrate September 21 than in helping students begin to maladjust to prevailing ideas about good citizenship. Such a process encompasses various learning objectives: perceiving that their individual stories are intertwined with the stories of their peers and communities; that people working amid institutional contexts face concrete but negotiable constraints; that working together, students can realize exciting—if modest—results in a relatively short period of time; that rhetoric and writing constitute powerful tools for advancing this work; that it is possible to be civically engaged without sacrificing one's career; and ultimately, that within a society plagued by structural injustice, "good citizens" participate in ongoing efforts (big or small) to remedy this injustice. To a large extent, then, the success I am looking for reflects substantial changes in students' mindsets. Considering the extent of these changes, it is unrealistic to anticipate quick and obvious results; instead, as I explain in the essay's conclusion, I endeavor to practice creative maladjustment's pedagogical corollary: *creative waiting*.

Peace and Habit

Sherry's initial response to *Peace One Day* exemplifies the enthusiasm that inspired students to choose an awareness campaign as their capstone project:

> After watching the film, I logged onto his website and became a member, I have joined his website, Facebook and Twitter fan page and promoted it by sending it to all my "Facebook and Twitter Friends and Family." I may not have millions of friends on either website but I am happy I did something to promote his amazing campaign. On September 21st I will gladly stand up for peace and do whatever I can to help share this documentary that I am so very much moved by. I am very thankful to you, Professor Feigenbaum, for showing us this film.

Chrystia expressed similar enthusiasm, but also self-doubt about its durability:

> How can people or I make this day, a day to observe? Jeremy managed to take this all the way to the UN and I cannot even imagine what it might take to bring this about in universities. I am not saying the entire US but at least universities … . It's a thought. It's a beginning. I hope to make this a goal and not give up. I hope to have the motivation and determination to see this through. I hope I am not the only one with this idea and will have assistance along the way. As for now, in this entry, only time will tell.

This shared gusto provoked animated brainstorming about possible actions. Ideas included putting together a soccer match for peace (as suggested on the website peaceoneday.org); exhorting administrators to implement an interdisciplinary Peace Studies certificate program; and having a series of information days leading to a PeaceFest rally with music, food, poetry, and speeches composed by the students. Julie remarked that she wanted to have the media cover PeaceFest and make it the most successful project of any of my classes.{3} [#note3]

This initial eagerness wore off as the semester progressed and recognition set in that most proposals would require time investments significantly greater than one term. Finally, students chose to focus their energy on PeaceFest. They intended to set up a table in the student center in order to distribute flyers and register people on peaceoneday.org, and then to hold the rally with speeches, music, and food near the campus peace monument the following day. In response to my question about this scaling back of plans, Sherry wrote:

> A few weeks have passed since we watched the "Peace film" and I have seen that although many of us students were moved by the film, we have kind of left the idea of changing or promoting peace, hanging. I agree with you, and I feel the same way, I think a lot of people, not just young people but older people as well, do not have a real sense of confidence that they have the power to make a positive change in the world. I think the idea is so big yet so simple that most people just laugh at it now, and do not believe that it can truly make a difference.

This ambivalence continued over the next few weeks as the rally approached and students made little progress preparing for it. Initial plans for a full day of music with a sound system and multiple bands were shelved in favor of a more laidback, acoustic jam session welcoming anyone with an instrument and a willingness to play in public. The class split into groups to accomplish various duties, but aside from their difficulties sticking to one schedule, the groups communicated poorly with one another, and a few students who had volunteered to take leadership roles were frequently absent. As a result,

important tasks such as printing flyers and a banner, as well as getting commitments from musicians, were repeatedly postponed.

These uncertainties and unfinished tasks continued until the last few days before PeaceFest. However, the event before the main event went off better than everyone's now downgraded expectations. The banner and flyers were finally completed, and eight students spent much of the day at the student center promoting the rally and registering people on the website. Anderson, Julie, and another student, Kinnary, showed considerable bravery by accosting passersby, handing out flyers and directing students to the table where food and computers awaited. Because she was not asking for money, Kinnary felt entitled to tell students about the existence of the International Day of Peace and to plug PeaceFest; she frequently dismissed people's attempts to dismiss her by walking with them and waving flyers in their faces until they stopped to listen. I was genuinely impressed, convinced that I could not have done the same. By afternoon's end, several hundred flyers had been distributed, and 75 students had registered on the website.

Unfortunately, PeaceFest itself faced more significant obstacles. First, the students met with poor *kairos*, unwittingly choosing a day in which two automobiles were being raffled elsewhere on campus. This event attracted considerable attention, so the students' own location benefited from much less foot traffic than they had anticipated. Moreover, the musicians who had agreed to attend either backed out at the last minute or could not be reached; consequently, PeaceFest's musical component was limited mostly to Anderson roaming the vicinity playing bongos—although one person with a didgeridoo came by and played for a few minutes. However, while the audience was small, several classmates took turns expressing prepared remarks about Jeremy Gilley and Peace Day. The highlight of the event occurred when Julie, who had steadfastly refused to speak publicly, became frustrated at the indifference of people walking by, many of whom refused to accept flyers. She later wrote about this feeling:

> The students at FIU are definitely a tough crowd, everyone seems too busy or caught up with their own things to even accept a flyer. I had several people say "no" when I asked them to come listen to a quick speech for class, yet two minutes later they were sitting at a bench a few feet away from where the speech would have been taking place!

Exasperated, she maladjusted to her own shyness, extemporaneously standing on a bench and shouting at students about the absurdity of the fact that Peace Day exists and so few people know about it, and that they do not care enough to listen.

Although PeaceFest did not meet initial hopes, the students had achieved the goal of moderately increasing campus awareness about September 21. As regards the dispositional changes I am most interested in, students' self-assessments acknowledge their continuing struggles with cultural forces of disengagement while intimating that they might maladjust to these forces in the future. Anderson, for example, concluded:

> Overall the outcome of this project met and actually exceeded my expectations. The problem is that my expectations were not great enough. It seems that the whole time I was only really concerned with my problems; I was committed to this event because of the grade attached to it. I really did believe it was important to spread the message of peace, but I am remorseful when I think of how much more I could have done to make this a personal success, even if I wouldn't have received a good grade or even if we ended up reaching the same amount of people with the message… . This project is something that I do hope to continue in the future. I look forward to bringing as many musicians in the community as possible together to make it something that could attract more attention to a message that is completely non-profit and from the heart.

I appreciate Anderson's sincerity about the impact of the grade on his actions, his regret at not having done more, and his aspirations to continue raising awareness, not just about Peace Day but about the *idea* of peace. Sherry's self-evaluation similarly expresses the tensions between her desire for civic participation and the continuing pressures of the conveyor belt:

> I would love to join Jeremy's team but school is my main priority and I am really happy with where my life is right now. Unfortunately, I fear failing or disappointing my parents, and therefore I may not have time to divert my attention to something else like the Peace Project… . Jeremy did something really brave putting all his "eggs in one basket." I would not take that risk now in my life because I fear that I could not be able to live off of "trying to promote peace," or simply fail and disappoint my parents. I have always loved this quote, "The people who are crazy enough to think they can change the world, are the ones who'll do it," and I believe it fits Jeremy perfectly.

This passage evinces dueling rhetorical forces of adaptation and activism. Clearly, the language of adaptation remains dominant, while the activist language once again comes in the form of a quote. As with Anderson, it is unclear what role Sherry will play in future Peace Days or in civic engagement more generally. But this response also illustrates signs of an emergent capacity to imagine maladjusting to the conveyor belt.{4} [#note4]

Conclusion: The Importance of Creative Waiting

Myles Horton argued that the key to trust is building the proper "tension between where people are and where they can be," a process of "making people uncomfortable" by "pushing them, trying to help them grow" (132). The danger, Horton warned, is that "[i]f you ever lose track of where people are in the process, then you have no relationship to them and there's nothing you can do" (132). Pedagogically, I have strong beliefs about where my students can be, and I seek to illuminate a path between where they are and this imagined location. The challenge for me and many other proponents of community engagement is keeping track of where students are in the process and recognizing that though they may end up somewhere different from our visions, they merit our trust. Most writing teachers recognize that students reared in an ecology of standardized testing, formulaic assignments, and five-paragraph essays require more than one semester or even a year to become confident, multimodal writers who can negotiate the genres of multiple rhetorical situations. I argue similarly that students who have grown up in an ecology replete with rhetorics of adaptation, including dominant cultural and educational narratives that invoke an instrumental-individualist meritocracy, cannot be expected to overcome these forces easily or efficiently. I myself was disengaged throughout college, a fact I recall semester after semester when I hear students express similar rationalizations for civic inactivity. My trajectory toward a justice-orientation progressed over years as I worked my way through various jobs, time spent in different countries, and graduate school, learning incrementally from community activists and the occasional maladjusting professor; one might say my process is ongoing.

If the goal is helping students see their place in the fight against injustice, there is so much that *cannot* be accomplished in a single semester. I try to focus on what *can* be accomplished, teaching with the hope that activities students participate in during their time in my class will become part of a longer process—of thinking, reflecting, analyzing, challenging, and being challenged—that leads them gradually toward maladjustment. Becoming more conscious of adaptive language, both as they use it and as it manifests itself in the cultural ecology, is an insufficient but *necessary* step in cultivating alternative dispositions toward engagement and social-justice work. Perhaps the greater obstacle is not that most students' mindsets fail to shift significantly after one semester, but that such courses are rarely part of engagement sequences. At Florida International University, we are trying to address this

problem by developing a writing certificate with various tracks such as public writing. This track includes a sequence that incorporates "Community Writing" and a newly developed, more "traditional" service-learning course that connects students with local schools and nonprofits to carry out writing-related projects. Such institutional changes are important, if modest, signs of progress.

To be sure, at times I do lose track of where students are in the process, becoming frustrated by their (tacit or overt) refusal to be outraged by the injustices that anger me, or to become civically engaged according to my ideal timeframe. But aside from recalling my own meandering path to engagement, such aggravation is tempered by my ironic recognition that students can maladjust, if not always in the ways we want. Moreover, engaged teachers who chafe at students' lack of a more sophisticated civic impulse might heed the advice of my colleague Carlos Gonzalez. He advocates *creative waiting*, which he describes as "a certain kind of patience and waiting that is not passivity; it's actually a means of resistance and space making to allow for the inner world that is waiting, wanting to survive and not burn out." Creative waiting invokes the *kairos* of pedagogical work that seeks both to enhance students' rhetorical skills and to challenge their dispositions. I have come to see creative waiting as a crucial element of creative maladjustment. In some cases, Gonzalez explains, "Waiting may be the very best thing. To do so in ways not readily understood by the dominant culture is a leap that plants a seed for another context and reality. Creative waiting is very different than merely passively waiting." It is, then, also part of trusting students. Creative waiting is difficult to practice amid the conflicting values, demands, needs, and desires expressed by our institutions, our students, and ourselves. But it is necessary for maladjusting creatively to the many hurdles, both institutional and pedagogical, to promoting civic engagement in morally ambiguous spaces.

Notes

1. All names of students are pseudonyms, and these students' work is reproduced without editing. (Return to text. [#note1-ref])

2. This lesson was inspired by a mentor, Buzz Alexander, a scholar-activist who calls these rhetorics of adaptation the *language of consent*, in that such language is used to help a person normalize, and ultimately consent to, other people's unjust circumstances.(Return to text. [#note2-ref])

3. I tell each new class about its predecessors, passing out materials created by previous students (and press clippings about classes that received any media attention). In doing so, I try to show students that their classroom community extends beyond the people currently sitting in the room. But this process has also had the unplanned consequence of provoking students' competitive instincts. (Return to text. [#note3-ref])

4. I have yet to teach "Community Writing" since the Occupy Wall Street protests, which began in New York and then spread nationally and internationally, became a mainstream cultural and political phenomenon. However, that mostly young people have taken the lead role in both initiating and sustaining the protests offers evidence that extreme dissatisfaction with the "hollowing out" of the middle class in terms of job opportunities and wages, as well as strong perceptions of rampant greed on Wall Street and political paralysis in Washington, are leading many to wonder whether even staying on the conveyor belt might lead them to the same "filth-strewn floor" as people *not* on the belt. The rhetorics of activism participants in these protests have articulated may indicate growing maladjustment to the cultural ecology of disengagement, and I look forward to seeing if and how these developments influence the civic dispositions of my future students. (Return to text. [#note4-ref])

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