

Social Justice in an Online Classroom

A Place-Based Approach to Belonging

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Abstract

While online learning and community engagement are not necessarily adversarial, this article explores the tensions between the two and how an online rhetoric course adapted place-based pedagogy to explore the idea of belonging. The assignment described here leverages online learning while sponsoring community engagement. The assignment invites students to learn about and participate in social justice action that, while accomplished virtually by way of Web 2.0 technologies and spaces, still connects students to the places that are significant to them. Such an approach is inherently invested in place-based pedagogy that frames social justice as abstract and complex issues that not only affect nation-states, but that also have tangible implications for privileged and marginalized groups in local communities (Flynn et al., 2010).

In 1990, Gloria Anzaldúa (2015) famously argued that our linguistic identities are our ethnic identities. “I am,” she declared, “my language” (p. 155). While many have demonstrated the powerful truth of this claim, I have more recently found myself wondering about a similar yet distinct line of thinking: our homelands are our identities. I am where I belong. This sense of belonging, of being one with a place and space, is not, however, easily achieved or even readily maintained. For countless individuals across the world, their sense of belonging is disrupted, shattered, and erased by conflict and disaster: by hurricanes, by war, by emigration and exile, and countless other forces.

These thoughts had been swirling in my mind when I began preparing to teach an upper division English course called Studies in Rhetoric. When I learned that the course would be offered online, I knew it was time to engage in a sustained conversation about our individual and collective senses of belonging, and about how rhetoric can help us understand the ways in which communities are shaped through narratives about who belongs. The seeming paradox of doing community-engaged work online creates both the challenges and opportunities of this assignment. For instance, in 2012, *Inside Higher Education* published a blog post on its regularly featured “Confessions of a Community College Dean,” written at the time under the pseudonym “Dean Dad,” that emphasized how “Colleges are being pushed to increase ‘service learning’ and ‘civic engagement’ initiatives at the exact same time that they’re being pressured to move online. These don’t have to be opposed, necessarily, but in practice they generally are” (Dean Dad, 2012). The blog describes the tension between online instruction and community engagement as having opposite impulses; face-to-face instruction, with the addition of community engaged work, reinforces students’ locations within a physical community, while the move toward online instruction dislocates students from a shared temporal space. For Dean Dad, community-engaged curriculum “is about doubling down on place. [Online learning] is about escaping it” (Dean Dad, 2012).

While Dean Dad speculates that online learning and community engagement are not necessarily adversarial, he does not explore how the two can be integrated. Hunt and Krakow (2015) define community engagement as courses and pedagogies that not only “strive to apply

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classroom knowledge to community needs,” but also “advance socially relevant causes” (p. 87). Many of today’s youth and young adults engage in social justice action that is based on or includes virtual components (Chen & Wang, 2020; Haddix et al., 2015). The proliferation of online social justice engagement is made possible by way of Web 2.0 technologies. User-generated content on web-based technologies like Zoom, Google Teams, Wikipedia, social media platforms, blogging sites, and Google docs situate users within horizontal nodes of power, rather than traditional power hierarchies (Han, 2011, pp. 1–2). This assignment leverages online learning while also sponsoring community engagement. The assignment invites students to learn about and participate in social justice action that, while accomplished virtually by way of Web 2.0 technologies and spaces, still connects students to the places that are significant to them. Such an approach is inherently invested in place-based pedagogy that frames social justice as abstract and complex issues that not only affect nation-states, but that also have tangible implications for privileged and marginalized groups in local communities (Flynn et al., 2010).

Doing such work within the context of a class on rhetoric requires us to articulate the complex connections between rhetoric, place, and social justice.¹ If students are going to explore how we come to think of who belongs in a community, we have to address how communities marginalize, evict, and erase those perceived to be outsiders. The present assignment began as a way of guiding students through some of these issues. By focusing on something that all students in the class had in common (relationships with places) yet distinctly did not share (a centralized, physical classroom, or even city or county boundaries), I hoped that together we would come to understand how a place-based approach to social justice can inspire community action and stronger—and perhaps more meaningful—connections to the places we have belonged.

Assignment Context and Implementation

The idea for this assignment stemmed from both my reading and my own experiences. The semester I taught Studies in Rhetoric was my first semester on the tenure track. I had come to Sam Houston State University (SHSU), a public four-year institution in southeast Texas, from northern California. While SHSU is still a designated primarily white institution (white students currently make up 49% of the undergraduate population), its student body demographics are changing. The institution increasingly serves a diverse student body: approximately 24% of undergraduate students are Hispanic, approximately 16% are Black, and approximately 45% of undergraduates are the first in their family to attend college (Sam Houston State University, n.d.-a, n.d.-b). At the same time, I was reading bell hooks’s 2009 collection *Belonging: A Culture of Place*. In many ways, hooks’s words resonated with my own experiences at the time. Like hooks, I felt the emotional swings of uprooting oneself: the intense feelings of longing to return to my “home” along with acknowledging the necessity of having left (2009, pp. 17–18). Even as I found comfort in her words, I knew there were vast chasms between our experiences. As a white, cisgender, heterosexual woman, my stories of departure and subsequent searches for belonging are vastly different than hooks’s search for belonging or the larger history of displacement and exile among African American communities. As I worked through *Belonging*, I found myself interrogating when and how I was making connections with hooks and where my story and my privilege necessarily indicated departures.

One of the key differences between my own story of departures and returns—my own search for belonging—was made more apparent to me as I considered the fact that, within the sociomaterial and rhetorical constructs of my new home, my old home, and more broadly in the United States, my story and my communities’ stories are well-documented. As a descendent of European immigrants who came to the United States in search of religious freedom, my collective

ancestors' stories are written everywhere—in textbooks, in art, in the American imagination, and even in our monuments, memorials, and historical sites and markers. The fact that the histories captured in monuments and memorials are situated within white, colonial, and racist frames affects communities beyond signaling who does and does not belong. Such practices institutionally affirm my belonging in these communities while simultaneously disavowing the rights of belonging for many minoritized populations. Within this context, pursuing social justice involves deconstructing the rhetorical and historical domination of white-oriented narratives of belonging within historical signage. To this end, the following questions guided the design of this assignment:

1. What assignments would foster students' reflection on their own relationships to places and spaces?
2. How can this assignment cultivate students' understanding of and appreciation for the rhetorical and institutional forces at work in the exile, displacement, and erasure of marginalized bodies?
3. What methods of study would help students make connections within an online learning space—itself seemingly dislocated from space and place?
4. In what ways could we translate this learning into social justice action?

With these questions in mind, I searched for online resources like databases, libraries' online special collections, and governmental resources. I found the Texas Historical Commission's (THC) website (Texas Historical Commission, n.d.-a). THC is tasked with the preservation of architectural, archaeological, and cultural landmarks in the state of Texas. Among the many resources available through THC's website is the Texas Historical Sites Atlas, which enables users to explore THC's historical markers by county, marker type, and the site's historical designation as seen on the [THC Atlas website](#) (Texas Historical Commission, n.d.-a).

Using the various resources available through THC, I designed an assignment in which students would research a historical site or a historical marker of their choice in Texas. While I was teaching online, most of the students were from or currently living in Texas, and I encouraged students to choose sites that were proximate to where they live or have lived. Students researched the historical site or marker and paid close attention to the ways in which the site/marker's history was rhetorically constructed. This involved looking for historical moments that had been “whitewashed” to deflect racial violence, distorted, or completely erased. After learning about the official and unofficial histories of the place, students wrote proposals directed to the THC in which they proposed revisions to the marker/site information that told an expanded history by recovering lost bodies and perspectives.

Student Responses

Despite the challenges of the assignment, student responses demonstrated strong connections between social justice and the material aspects of place made apparent through rhetorical inquiry. Students were able to identify gaps in the history contained in the historical markers and at the sites, and associate those gaps with continued injustice. Moreover, students in the course were able to connect that oppression with the need for social justice action. All students found ways to revise the historical signage they researched. One student, for example, researched the historical marker in their local community, which they identify as “a large, unincorporated, mostly rural area” in their county.² This student recalls feeling like they grew up in their own version of *Little House on the Prairie*. By uncovering the hidden and ignored parts of the community's history, the student explores how such constructions rely on colonial

narratives that erase the history of Indigenous nations. The student's proposal reveals how the land has been subjected to multiple seizures without permission, treaty, or land grants: the first documented seizure occurred when Spanish settlers and missionaries took the land from at least eight Indigenous nations such as the Akokisa, Karankawa, Coapite, Coushatta, Bidai, Patiri, Deadose, and Atakapa-Ishak.³ Subsequently, the land was taken from the Spanish by the Mexican people in their campaign for independence, and later by white settlers from the Mexican government. This student observes that, while the historical marker mentions the town's white settlers' unlawful seizure of the land, the historical marker frames this moment in couched, whitewashed terms. Analyzing the sign directly, the student shares this excerpt from the marker:

Apparently [the White settler] did not have a land grant from the Mexican government for the land he claimed, but when Texas gained independence from Mexico in 1836 he received a headright land grant...

The student's exploration reveals how history is rhetorically constructed through a compounding process of omissions and subtle positioning. The student makes several key interventions in their paper. First, through thorough research into this land, the student identifies a pattern of land theft that the historical marker fails to mention or accurately represent. The student pushes into this analysis by considering how theft is characterized as an apparent lack of permission, a move that potentially eliminates multiple communities' claims to a sense of belonging to the student's hometown. Furthermore, by recovering the historical presence of multiple Indigenous nations, the student seeks to create more meaningful representation of diverse bodies in the ongoing creation of their community's history.

Future Assignment Directions

As I have delved more into the resources available through the THC, my understanding of how to encourage students to enact the social justice that we learn about continues to evolve. While the proposal genre worked well to emphasize students' opportunity for communicating with state agencies about social justice issues, students were not required to actually send it out and, to my knowledge, none of them did. The assignment stopped short, in other words, in bringing their research and action to the communities in which change may actually take place. In this regard, the assignment functioned more as preparation for future action, placing it within Crowley's (1998) critique of writing instruction for the ways in which writing in the classroom can be "artificial" and "imitat[ive]" (p. 8). As I have considered how online students could be invited to bring these proposals to their communities in some way, I have discovered that THC has an official Marker Review process (Texas Historical Commission, n.d.-b). The process is intended for contesting the "factual accuracy of the marker based on verifiable, historical evidence" such as misspelled names, inaccurate dates, and statements that are not historically accurate (para. 1). Writing the proposals with the intention that students can later submit the THC Marker Review Request will be one realignment that will potentially transform student writing from artificial to authentic action.

The assignment could also be tailored from state-level social justice action to the local context by collaborations with local activist groups who are working toward removing confederate monuments and to rewrite their communities' histories. In Huntsville, for example, our Black Lives Matter group has been working tirelessly to remove a confederate statue that sits within walking distance of SHSU. Collaborations with such groups (now ever more possible thanks to Web 2.0 technologies) can engage online students with the university's local community regardless of where students are logging in and can enable students to recognize the possibility

of effecting change.

Another future direction for this assignment would include more focused attention on the practice of land acknowledgment statements as part of our classroom inquiry and practice. Nearly all of the submitted final projects fell onto a spectrum between, on one hand, making mention of the Indigenous nations who resided and currently reside on the land prior to white settlement and, on the other, interrogating the reasons for these communities' absences in the markers and signage.

To assist us with this work, we turned to a second digital resource, this time an online mapping project provided by [Native Land Digital](#), a Canadian nonprofit organization (Native Land Digital, n.d.). Native Land Digital provides an interactive, multilayered mapping database that allows for multiple ways of engaging with the site. One can use the search function to type in an address—for your university's main campus, your home, or even for a historical landmark or marker—and reveal on which nations' land your chosen address resides. Many students incorporated information about the Indigenous nations relevant to their chosen sites. This information, however, tended to be the least developed in the proposals. Beyond identifying an Indigenous presence in the area and arguing that such bodies should be rewritten into historical markers, students did not engage with these absences more robustly. While Native Lands Digital helped students locate marginalized histories of the land, more scaffolded time and energy will be dedicated to uncovering colonial forces embedded in the rhetorics deployed in historical writing, as well as the larger recovery work that is ongoing in Indigenous Studies and activism. This might include more work with studying and writing land acknowledgment statements, partnering with community organizations, local Indigenous counsels, librarians, and other university departments in preparing to write their proposals.

Conclusion

The relationships among social justice, places, and spaces, and rhetoric are undeniable. While oppression is sustained, in part, by rhetorical domination, justice is a process likewise made possible through rhetorical intervention. Writing about the legacy of racism in the southern United States, bell hooks (2009) observes that calls from white communities to maintain symbols of the confederacy, such as Civil War monuments and flags, combined with slogans like “‘heritage not hate,’” only serve “racist power and privilege” (p. 10). Her words have guided my approach to this historical marker proposal assignment. For hooks, “the confederate flag is a symbol of heritage *and* hate. The history of the confederacy will always evoke the memory of white oppression of black folks, with rebel flags, guns, fire, and the hanging noose—all symbols of hate” (pp. 10-11, emphasis added). Engaging in social justice requires us to recognize how oppressive forces like colonialism and racism have shaped our communities and the histories we write about them. The historical marker proposal assignment invites students to engage in the process of social justice by considering how equity can be pursued by dismantling the colonial and racist narratives encoded in our established histories. By engaging with one artifact that makes up their cities' histories, students learn how systemic forms of oppression are scaffolded by numerous social, material, and discursive structures. Moreover, students can begin to take part in rewriting more inclusive and more just, narratives of the places that have supported their own sense of belonging.

ASSIGNMENT

Writing Counter-Histories: A Place-Based Approach to Intersecting Rhetoric and Race

Overview and Purpose

bell hooks's book *Belonging: A Culture of Place* articulates one African American woman's relationship to place. In it, hooks delves into her own history of place: the places she has felt connected to, the places she has felt exiled from, and everything in between. For hooks, to understand Black rhetorical practices and identities, one first needs to understand how displacement and recurring themes of place have shaped their collective identity and, when displaced, many African Americans (including hooks) "[feel] a greater necessity to articulate the role of homeplace in [their] artistic vision" (22).

As we have read in this unit, a substantive body of rhetorical scholarship has interrogated the relationships among bodies, the places and space they inhabit, and how histories are constructed through memorials, monuments, and historical markers. These receptacles of history, however, tell a partial history, one that is often "whitewashed" to minimize violence.

Assignment

To further our understanding of the relationship among communities, rhetoric, and space, in this assignment you will choose a historical marker through the Texas Historical Commission (THC), analyze how history is rhetorically constructed within the marker, and write a six- to eight-page proposal to the THC to revise a historical marker to include a more inclusive history for that location.

Requirements

1. To begin this project, you should select a Texas historical site. For purposes of this assignment, I am asking you to go through the [Texas Historical Commission](#) (THC). You should select a site that is of interest to you. If you don't have a site in mind, you might explore what is available through several means, including:
 - THC's Atlas, which allows you to conduct keyword searches, searches by County, and more can be found here: <https://atlas.thc.state.tx.us/>
 - THC's map of African American history markers: <https://www.thc.texas.gov/preserve/projects-and-programs/state-historical-markers/thematic-marker-maps/african-american>
 - THC's map of Hispanic history markers: <https://www.thc.texas.gov/preserve/projects-and-programs/state-historical-markers/thematic-marker-maps/hispanic-history-texas>
 - THC's map and listing of historical sites: <https://www.thc.texas.gov/preserve/projects-and-programs/thc-state-historic-sites>
2. The proposal you write should be organized into the following six sections:
 - A. Introduction
 - B. Established History of the Site
 - C. Significance of Site to local/state/regional/national/transnational histories
 - D. Analysis of Missing Histories
 - E. Proposed Revisions with justifications
 - F. Conclusion

In Sections B and C of the proposal, you are engaging in historical writing (we will talk more about this in class). You will research the history of this site. Using a minimum of five

- (5) sources from the library (three scholarly and two non-scholarly), the proposal should explore the history of the site while also illuminating what is missing from that history. In Section D, for example, if I were analyzing the historical marker on page 1 of this document, I might explore the development of Conroe as a city, but I also might want to explore how any previous histories are rendered invisible by the sign: it's almost as if nothing was in this area prior to 1890. Your job is to discover or speculate about that history. For example, I might guess that there may have been Hispanic or Indigenous communities prior to the 1890s and, using the library resources, try to recover that history. If you are interested in thinking about indigenous histories, you might consider beginning with Native Land Digital's excellent resource: <https://native-land.ca/>.
3. Even if you are not able to make a clearly recoverable revised history, such as locating a specific community on the exact site of the historical marker, the idea is to demonstrate an understanding about how histories tend to marginalize the role of non-white bodies. So, doing research about Native tribes local to Walker County and speculating about how that might relate to Huntsville would be perfectly fine. In Section E, the writer should provide some new verbiage for the marker and justify why the revisions are important. Sections D and E are perfect opportunities to blend analysis and creativity.
 4. Special Collections in the Newton Gresham library has a lot of great Texas-specific materials, so you might also try searching in the special collections database for unique primary materials relevant to your site.

Notes

¹See, for example, Blair (1999); Endres and Senda-Cook (2011); O'Brien (2018); Powell (2012); Reynolds (2007); Sanchez and Moore (2015).

²All student writing is used with written permission from students. No names or specific information about students' hometowns are provided to protect anonymity. Plural pronouns are used for individual students.

³Where possible, spellings are taken from each tribe's websites. For those tribes that are no longer extant or for whom no public website could be found, I am using spellings taken from the Texas Historical Association's digital *Handbook of Texas* (Texas State Historical Association, n.d.).

Supplementary Material

For supplementary material accompanying this paper, including a PDF facsimile of the assignment description formatted as the author(s) presented it to students, please visit <https://doi.org/10.31719/pjaw.v5i1.73>.

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