

Prompt

a journal of academic
writing assignments

SPECIAL ISSUE

*Social Justice Writing Assignments:
Toward a Politics of Location*

Editor's Note <i>Susanne E. Hall</i>	1
Guest Editors' Note <i>Ann E. Green, Wiley Davi & Olivia Giannetta</i>	3
ARTICLES	
Designing Publicly Engaged First-Year Research Projects: Protest Art and Social Change <i>Bridget Draxler</i>	7
Social Justice and Corporate Mission Statements: Analyzing Values in Business Writing <i>Brigitte Mussack</i>	15
Respecting, Embracing, and Honoring Cultural Practices through Collective Storytelling <i>Elizabeth Yomantas</i>	23
Social Justice in an Online Classroom: A Place- Based Approach to Belonging <i>Leslie R. Anglesey</i>	34
Writing for Clean Water and Sanitation: Accelerating Momentum Toward the UN Sustainable Development Goals Through Action Research <i>Debbie Goss</i>	42
Embedding Ethnocultural Empathy in a Community-Based Health Intervention Writing Assignment <i>Maranda C. Ward</i>	54

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Editor's Note

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I am delighted to share with you the first special issue of *Prompt*, “Social Justice Writing Assignments: Toward a Politics of Location.” This special issue is the first of two on social justice, and the second will be published in winter 2022 as issue 6.1.

Our special issues' editors, Wiley Davi and Ann E. Green, along with their editorial assistant Olivia Giannetta, *have written their own introduction to the issue* that explains their experiences and goals in putting it together and offers a preview of each article. Ann, Wiley, and Olivia deserve full credit for the compelling issue you will be reading in these pages—they selected proposals, organized and oversaw peer review, and worked closely with authors to develop the issue. The issues bears the imprint of their expertise, energy, and ethics of care.

As a journal, we hope that our special issues on social justice will support and ignite efforts to fight structural oppression in higher education and beyond. These special issues aim to promote work by college instructors who are taking on issues of anti-racism, cultural competence, inclusion, and equity in their classrooms and in their writing assignments. These instructors are grappling with historical and current oppressions of various kinds and finding ways to meaningfully introduce them to students and to lead students to understand and challenge them. I believe our readers will find, in pondering the uses and limits of these assignments, valuable fuel for their own pedagogical work.

We are very fortunate to have Wiley Davi and Ann E. Green editing these special issues. They are scholars whom I admire deeply for their ability to incorporate teaching and research on social justice into their careers in myriad ways. Wiley Davi is professor of English and Media Studies at Bentley University, where they have served as chair of the EMS Department and Associate Dean of Arts and Sciences. Wiley is a program facilitator for Bentley's Center for Women and Business and for the Rotterdam School of Management's Erasmus Center for Women and Organizations. Their teaching and research interests span the fields of writing, diversity, gender studies, leadership, and service-learning. Wiley is co-author of the book *Leading with Uncommon Sense* (Davi & Spelman, 2020), which offers new theories of humane and humble leadership. Ann E. Green is a professor of English at Saint Joseph's University in Philadelphia, where she started and directed the University Writing Center (1998-2004), directed the Gender Studies program, and directed the graduate program in Writing Studies. She received the 2017 Outstanding Leader in Experiential Education Award from the [National Society for Experiential Education](#), and she teaches in the [Inside/Out Prison Exchange Program](#). She regularly teaches an immersion course in violence and nonviolence that travels to Northern Ireland, and she also teaches “Hospital Stories,” a service-learning course in narrative medicine.

I have learned a great deal from our collaboration with Ann and Wiley on this issue and am deeply grateful for the care and expertise they have brought to this work. I thank them for helping us open new vistas for this journal. Ann and Wiley have been assisted in their editorial work by Olivia Giannetta, an English major at Saint Joseph's University in Philadelphia. Olivia

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has participated in the Inside/Out Prison Exchange program, volunteered in Youth Courts in Chester County, PA, and is currently working with the Pardon Project in Philadelphia. Serving as an editorial assistant for *Prompt* was part of her 2020 Summer Scholar's Project. Thank you, Olivia, for your valuable work on this issue.

I also want to acknowledge an important recent transition for the journal. Jonathan Dueck, the founding co-editor of the journal, is stepping down from his remaining duties as technical editor. Jon stepped down as editor in 2018, after taking on a position as Vice President and Academic Dean at Canadian Mennonite University. Despite his incredibly busy schedule as a leader of his university, he continued to oversee the journal's production through issue 4.2. As I wrote in my editor's note for issue 2.2, *Prompt* would not exist without Jon. This is true not only because he and I developed the idea for the journal collaboratively, but also because he developed and maintained the considerable technical infrastructure needed to produce it. We are delighted to welcome to our team our new production editor, Brian N. Larson, Associate Professor of Law at Texas A&M University. Brian is already building on the strong foundation Jon established. You will notice some new design elements in this issue of the journal, and they are a result of Brian's creativity and vision for our future work.

In closing my introduction to this special issue on social justice, I want to share an excerpt of a poem by Diane di Prima, whose work I revisited after her death last October. I first discovered and read di Prima's *Revolutionary Letters* when I was in college, and her work helped encourage me to begin thinking about social justice more seriously. In "Revolutionary Letter #8," she offers guidance to leftist protest organizers of the early 1970s. The poem's final stanza offers a broader thesis for moving toward social justice:

NO ONE WAY WORKS, it will take all of us

shoving at the thing from all sides

to bring it down. (di Prima, 2007, p. 17, originally published in 1971)

I hope this issue of *Prompt* inspires you to keep shoving at the things—ableism, homophobia, racism, sexism, transphobia, and other forms of oppression—from wherever you are and in whatever ways you can. It will take all of us.

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Guest Editors' Note

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When we applied to be guest editors of *Prompt's* special issue on social justice, we didn't know we would be doing it during a global pandemic. When we wrote and sent out the call for papers, we had no idea that in the spring of 2020, we would abruptly switch from face-to-face teaching to remote learning and struggle to find toilet paper in our respective cities. In other words, we did not realize that 2020 would be both quotidian and historic, both tragic and hopeful.

We are white, feminist activists who have engaged in anti-racist pedagogies, social justice scholarship, and activist work in the classroom for decades, but the last four years has made our quest for social justice even more urgent. President 45's recent ban on critical race theories and diversity training highlights how social justice work is both crucial and contested. As white feminists who work for racial justice, dismantling the global pandemic of racism has always been at the core of what we do. We did not realize that the struggle for social justice would feel so urgent.

We did not know when the call for proposal went out that we would receive so many thoughtful, passionate responses that addressed racism, classism, environmental justice, and privilege. We were heartened by the range, depth, and commitment to social justice writing that our colleagues demonstrated, and our first challenge was to select a small number of proposals to be developed into full-scale articles. This was an excellent problem to have, however, and Susanne and Holly graciously accepted our idea for expanding our single issue to two issues a year apart, loosely organized as public-facing or audience-driven assignments and inward-facing or reflection-driven assignments. In this issue, writers describe audience-driven assignments where students engage in projects that bridge communities and classrooms, considering both global citizenship and local community interventions. These assignments are from business, education, developmental English, health sciences, first-year writing and rhetoric.

When we accepted the initial proposals, we did not know that Breonna Taylor and Ahmaud Arbery—young Black people who could have been our students, our neighbors, our family—would be shot while living their lives.

And we did not know that footage of the murder of George Floyd, 46, would go viral and that the ensuing protests around the country and the world would be a clarion call for action to end systemic racism, and we did not know that Tony McDade, a Black trans man, would be shot and killed by police on June 1st during the protests of Floyd's death.

As we write this, over 220,000 people in the United States, many of them Black and brown¹, have died from complications of COVID-19. While writing assignments that do social justice work might seem like a trickle in the ocean of inequity, fear, and grief that have characterized life in 2020 in particular, and America in general since its founding, we are mindful of Asao B. Inoue (2019)'s question during his chair's address at the 2019 Conference on College Composition and Communication: "How do we language so people stop killing each other?"

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In these articles, what we have recognized is that social justice is a *process* of seeking equity. On our journey toward social justice, form and content matter, how we assign writing matters, how we respond to writing matters, how we treat students matters. Toward that end, we sought assignments that encourage students to consider systemic inequalities including (but not limited to) racism, classism, sexism, heterosexism, and ableism. We were particularly interested in assignments that encouraged students to move from a consideration of personal/individual injustice to reflections on systemic or structural inequality. In working with authors, we encouraged them to reflect on their own intersectionality.

“How do we language so people stop killing each other?”

The authors implicitly took up Inoue’s question as their drafts evolved and adapted to our present moments. Two writers, Bridget Draxler and Brigitte Mussack, are both located in Minnesota, and their pieces reflect their proximity to George Floyd’s murder. Draxler’s “Designing Publicly Engaged First-Year Research Projects: Protest Art and Social Change,” explores how emerging writers can use protest art as both a subject of research and a heuristic for their own protest art. This multimodal approach illustrates how emerging writers can use their voices for social change at predominantly white institutions.

Mussack, located in Minneapolis, uses her students’ commitment to social justice as a starting point for analysis of corporate mission statements. While business students are often seen as those furthest removed from social justice conversations, Mussack highlights how reflecting on mission statements can help students examine their own ethics and values as they collaborate with one another.

Other pieces in this issue also consider place and what Adrienne Rich (1994) called “a politics of location.” Elizabeth Yomantas’s “Respecting, Embracing, and Honoring Cultural Practices through Collective Storytelling” describes how students in “Culturally Responsive Service-Learning” travel to Fiji and, with permission from Fijians, can employ *talanoa* or story-telling in their assignments. Yomantas, using *talanoa* in her own piece, then demonstrates how other service-learning courses with immersion experiences can also develop assignments specific to their cultural contexts.

Leslie R. Anglesey’s “Social Justice in an Online Classroom: A Place-Based Approach to Belonging,” discusses the paradox of online classroom and social justice work. Online classrooms, Anglesey argues, can become locations for exploring home, place, and social justice. Using bell hooks (2009)’ reflections on “home” and belonging, Anglesey theorizes how Web 2.0 technology can create opportunities for students to advocate for revisions to historic markers in order to question the dominant narrative and consider missing Indigenous and marginalized people’s histories.

Debbie Goss’s “Writing for Clean Water and Sanitation: Accelerating Momentum Toward the UN Sustainable Development Goals Through Action Research” describes a pair of writing assignments that ask first-year writers to revise a Wikipedia page based on UN sustainable development goal #6, a goal for clean water and sanitation by the year 2030. By revising a Wikipedia page in a group, students receive feedback from volunteer editors at Wikipedia to help shape and improve their articles. As a follow up, students use their research to write individual opinion pieces for *Consilience: The Journal of Sustainable Development*. Goss’s thoughtful sequence of assignments gives students space to reflect on how they might advocate for the UN goals in their own lives. While Goss teaches this assignment to a large number of international students in first-year writing, she describes how the UN sustainable development goals and the writing assignments could be adapted for literature, environmental science, anthropology, sociology, biology, or business courses.

Finally, Maranda Ward’s article, “Teaching and Assessing Empathy Among Health Professions

Students” explores how ethnocultural empathy or racial/ethnic perspective taking can be embedded in an online course that prepares online students for the health care professions. By asking students to propose a sustainable change in their local communities after speaking with a community gatekeeper, Ward theorizes how students can rethink the position of “expert” in relation to systemic inequities in the health care system, a crucial intervention during the COVID-19 pandemic.

We would like to thank all of the peer reviewers for this issue who made time amid a rapidly shifting landscape to respond thoughtfully to drafts of articles, and who were also, themselves, strong proponents of social justice. In order to break down the traditional distance between authors and editors and in an attempt to make our process more transparent and thus more just, we met with authors via Zoom and offered support for their revisions. During these editing hours, some of the authors met one another as we discussed ways to structure and revise articles; we hope the temporary online community facilitated by Zoom was helpful. In the summer of 2020, as we worked dialogically with the writers on their drafts, the articles brought into sharp relief how our locations and contexts matter and how we are always interconnected. Some of us lost people to COVID, some of our lives were disrupted by wildfire, all of our lives were disrupted by pandemics.

As this issue heads to press, President-Elect Joseph Biden has just mentioned both disability and trans identity in his victory speech (“Read,” 2020, Nov., 7, 9:14 PM CST). This is the first time a president has mentioned both identities and trans women like Jennifer Finney Boylan and Charlotte Clymer have acknowledged this moment on Twitter. We seemed to be poised on the edge of hope, but we cannot forget what the poet Audre Lorde (1994) called “the dead behind us.”

In the summer of 2020, amid the protests after George Floyd’s murder, three Black trans women, Nina Pop, Dominique Fells, and Riah Milton, were killed. While we look forward with hope, we cannot forget the extraordinary high rate of murder among trans people of color. An absence in this issue, among other absences, is a discussion of sexuality, trans identity, and intersectionality. If we are languaging so people will stop killing each other, how can we create spaces in our classrooms for the discussion of sexuality and more intentional discussion of trans identity? Hopefully those of you who are working with trans writing assignments and gender queer writing will submit your assignments to future issues of *Prompt*. To quote Nomi from the Netflix series *Sense8*, what we offer in this issue is the idea that “I’m not just a me. I’m also a we. And we march with pride” (The Wachowskis & Straczynski, 2015, June 5). May you read this issue with an eye toward our interconnectedness and with an idea that we can all work together for justice.

Yours in struggle,

Ann

Wiley

Olivia

Notes

¹We’re drawing our language choices here from the *New York Times* discussion of Black vs. brown (Coleman, 2020).

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Designing Publicly Engaged First-Year Research Projects

Protest Art and Social Change

Bridget Draxler

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Abstract

This research assignment invites students in a first-year writing preparation course to explore topics of social justice through protest art. The course is taught at a small, private liberal arts college in a course for “emerging writers.” I have taught this assignment at a predominantly White institution (PWI), in a course where the majority of students are Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC). Students choose a work of protest art from the campus library special collections, frame the social justice issue it addresses in a local context using local sources, and then write an essay that puts that research in conversation with their own story. Finally, linking public history to civic engagement, students create their own protest art as a community call to action. The multimodal, local, and personal nature of this writing assignment creates opportunities for students to see the connections between their emerging identities as writers and civic actors. This assignment can create space for students to use their multilingual identities to speak back to the structural inequality within our institution, developing confidence in their own voices to call for meaningful change.

Reflection: Language and Identity in the Composition Classroom

My “Research Paper: Protest Art and Social Change” assignment asks students in a first-year writing preparation course to choose a work of protest art related to a particular social justice issue, write a research paper that frames this issue within our community, and then create their own protest art for local distribution as a call to action. The assignment ties together my identities as a literary historian, a public humanist, and a composition teacher in its combination of archival, multimodal, and local research and writing. More importantly, it gives emerging writers multiple ways to express their voices. But I tell students frankly, I am no artist. “If all you can draw is stick people,” I say, “that’s great. Stick people are all that I can draw, too. I’m interested in what you have to say about those stick people in your writing.”

Creating local protest art in my composition classroom is a way for my students to claim agency as writers and civic actors in our community, and my goal as a teacher is to help them to see these emerging identities as powerful and mutually constructive. My task is made easier by the fact that my students are drawn to work that means something to them, and they excel at understanding the complexities of intersectional identities. The particular course in which I teach this assignment at St. Olaf College is a developmental or basic writing course, or what we like to call a first-year writing preparation course. St. Olaf is a private, selective, rural residential liberal arts college of 3,000 students; while we are experiencing rapid demographic changes in our student body (with increasing populations of neurodiverse, international, and multilingual students, for instance), we remain a privileged and predominantly White institution (PWI).

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In my course, however, students are almost all low-income, first-generation students of color—which creates both a risk of stigmatization and an opportunity for meaningful community. Alvarez and Lee (2020) remind us that we live in a linguistically pluralistic society in which students bring “rich and complex language practices” (p. 62) to our classrooms that rub against the “monolingual ideology of U.S. education” (p. 62), for which they face “institutional surveillance and policing of their own language practices” (p. 68). In a basic writing course filled with students who are Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) at a PWI, the course itself can perpetuate the stigma. As a non-tenure track (NTT) faculty member who teaches basic writing without explicit training in the field (all of the basic writing teachers in my school are NTT), my position within the institutional hierarchy is also marginal. My body can exacerbate my students’ feelings of marginality, too: I continually struggle with the ways in which my physical presence, as a White professor at a PWI, shapes the ways in which my students experience the course, and the degree to which they feel comfortable being and expressing themselves. They make assumptions, understandably, about what kind of language I expect from them based on my power, position, and race. For a handful of students, the way I look can become a barrier to their learning. The fact that this course exists, and the fact that I teach it, is evidence of a systemically unjust world.

Yet I am often reminded how the course itself, partly through the demographics of its students and partly through its marginalized status outside general education, becomes a site for us to consider structural inequality within our own institution. My students are, by and large, hungry for opportunities to name, confront, and address these inequities, and while most could be described as “emerging” writers, in terms of their grasp of standardized written English, they carry sophisticated vocabularies and ways of thinking about identity and social justice.¹

While the nominal purpose of this course seems to be assimilationist—to prepare writers for college-level writing—my real goal is to equip students with the confidence to advocate for themselves as writers, even within a system that may not automatically recognize or reward the ways of knowing and using language in which they thrive. Because the very existence of this course is tied up with stigmatization of language outside standardized written English, and because students are placed into it, it becomes even more imperative to give them opportunities for choice and agency by inviting students to do things like co-create assignment rubrics, opt into labor-based contract grading (Inoue, 2019), and write multimodal projects.

Multimodality and Writing Social Change

Multimodality is certainly nothing new to composition or human communication; Jody Shipka (2011) writes about the ways in which writing is and always has been multimodal.² But for many students, multimodality does not “count” as college writing the same way that multilingualism does not “count” as college writing.³ It is not formal; it is not academic; it is not appropriate. The euphemisms are many, but they all signal a privileging of certain kinds of writing and writers. And crucially, Shipka suggests, destigmatizing one can destigmatize the other.

Multimodality leads to a reconsideration of what works *rhetorically* rather than what is “right,” and a recognition of contexts in which writing *effectively* may not be strictly “correct.” Assigning a multimodal project led to the first time, for instance, that students turned in multilingual writing projects to me. I did not invite them explicitly or even anticipate that they would create multilingual projects, but as Shipka (2011) may have anticipated, the nature of the multimodal assignment gave them permission to do so.

There is also an unexpected way in which assigning a creative, multimodal project, *particularly* as someone with limited artistic abilities, helps reposition my expertise, and theirs,

in the classroom. When students see me draw stick people on the board or hear me use my own “home” language, they are primed to realize that I am also not the absolute authority on their artwork, their topic, or their language. They gain confidence in recognizing their own meaningful expertise: choosing topics that draw on their cultural epistemologies and embodied experiences, and writing in language that demonstrates deep understanding of their audiences and themselves.

Integrating art (or, if you want to be more fancy, “craftivism” (Greer, 2014)) into my composition course might seem like an unlikely choice for someone who is intimidated by Play-Doh. But in fact, while it does not represent my skill set, it does capture my philosophy of teaching writing. By challenging students to identify an issue they care about, conduct local research about that topic, and then propose specific local action, I hope students will see their writing—and multimodal communication more broadly—as a way to help create a more just world. If they can believe that their writing can actually make a difference, I hope that they will embrace both their responsibility to promote change and their identities as writers, and the ways those roles are mutually constitutive.

Protest Art

This assignment was a civic engagement project before it was a multimodal one. Teaching publicly engaged research and writing to first-year students is not radical, but it is transformative. While the magnitude of global problems can seem overwhelming and students can feel discouraged in the face of massive systemic injustices, reframing research assignments to focus on local issues, local sources, and local solutions can give students the tools and confidence to make changes they can see. My locally focused research assignment has evolved over the past ten years, sometimes including curation, sometimes in groups, and once as a podcast. The idea to add protest art to my local research assignment came from what may seem like an unlikely source: the campus archives.

Before Minneapolis erupted, just 40 miles north of us, as an important site of Black Lives Matter (BLM) protest in the wake of George Floyd’s murder, I set up a meeting with our new Librarian for Special Collections and Archives Instruction to see what local sources students might access in our campus archives. She steered me to a rich collection of *Artists’ Books*, recommending protest art from the Justseeds Artists’ Cooperative, a network of artists based in Pittsburgh that is “committed to social, environmental, and political engagement” and that “believe in the transformative power of personal expression in concert with collective action” (“Justseeds | About,” n.d., header & para. 1). The three collections students chose from were “Migration Now!” (2012), a series of prints that frame migration as a human right; “We Are The Storm” (2014), a collection that frames climate change in terms of environmental justice, and the ways marginalized peoples are most severely impacted by fracking, oil pipelines, and mining; and “Celebrate People’s History: Iraq Veterans Against the War” (2014), a multimedia portfolio by and about veterans who have spoken out and taken action “to end the wars they served in” (para. 3).

Students visited the St. Olaf Libraries Special Collections to view a curated collection of posters advocating for social justice, and they used these works of art to inspire topics for their locally-driven research project, which culminated in the creation of their own protest art. In developing this version of the assignment, I worked closely with librarians in Special Collections and Research Instruction, who introduced students to our special collections and local online resources along with the more typical popular and peer-reviewed sources. Modeling this collaborative approach to students made them, I think, more open to using a collaborative approach themselves—seeking advice from our librarians, workshoping with peers or the

embedded Writing and Research Tutors, and reaching out to their home communities.⁴

Assignment Sequence

Students' first assignment for this project was a Special Collections Poster Analysis Activity, which asked them to choose three prints and respond to the text, design elements, and their own first impressions (see [Supplementary Materials](#)). To prepare students to do this analysis, I gave them a basic introduction to visual literacy, drawing on their own experiences as creators and consumers of visual material, but also building on the rhetorical analysis essay they had written earlier in the term. We talked about how visual texts, like written texts, can use stylistic elements like repetition, allusion, humor, organization and voice as rhetorical strategies, but how they also employ color, font, size, perspective, and symbolism to engage their audience. Students translated what they learned about author, purpose, context, and audience to analyzing works of art, and they considered the interplay of text and images in evaluating its rhetorical impact.

The assignment also built on the essay they had written earlier in the term supporting an opinion with personal experience. In this essay, students wrote about a local memorial, contextualized by readings surrounding the debate about removing memorials that glorify confederate or colonial history. This early practice of using personal experience as evidence, and then framing this experience as one of many “source” types for their research paper, set them up to reflect on their own identity, their stake in the issue, and their responsibility to take action.

While the research assignment built on these previous assignments and others, it was the first time that semester I asked students to conclude their essay with a proposal for specific, local change. The call to action, both in the essay and later in their own protest art, shifted students from reflecting and researching to action and activism. Many students found that identifying problems was easier than pitching solutions. It was, I would argue, the most empowering part of the assignment, as students pieced together concrete ways, based on their research and their individual experiences, to confront systemic injustice in their own communities. A Tibetan student who tackled the conflict between Tibet and China, for instance—a conflict that the student felt was deeply personal and impossibly complex—became passionate about educating her peers who were unfamiliar with the history or her perspective on it, including a Chinese student in her writing group. She could not negotiate a productive relationship between China and Tibet, but she did negotiate a productive relationship with her peer. It was not easy for either of them, but they practiced small-scale conflict resolution in a way that confronted this conflict in our classroom community.

Framing this issue locally and identifying a specific local audience helped other students to be specific in their argument and local in their solution. One student, for instance, wrote to first-generation students with immigrant parents about balancing the pressures of school and home. Another wrote to offices on our campus that support LGBTQ students and international students about better supporting the intersectional identities of queer immigrant students. Another challenged their peers' assumptions by explaining how the cultural identity of Latinx immigrants shapes perspectives and attitudes about higher education. One memorable essay written to LGBTQ Hmong youth in the writer's hometown offered support and advice for holding together identities that may sometimes seem conflicting.⁵ In each of these cases, a specific local audience created a sense of urgency, purpose, and humanity in their writing.

Working collaboratively with library staff, special collections staff, writing and research tutors, peers, and me was an important part of this essay process. Cultivating a deeply collaborative writing process helped students to consider multiple points of view more effectively and inclusively. While the assignment asked for a variety of source types—including art from special

collections, local news sources, popular sources, scholarly reference works, and peer reviewed sources, along with their own personal experiences—one surprise for me was a request from several students to also include personal interviews. After the assignment was amended to include this option for a local source, many chose to interview fellow students, family members, or neighbors to include personal stories about these issues to complement their own. These interviews heightened the personal stakes for many students, as some shared stories of a grandparent who had been a refugee or a peer in the course whom they discovered during peer review to have an immigration story that mirrored their own (see peer review worksheet in [Supplementary Materials](#)).

Asking students to create their own protest art fittingly closed this assignment, which started and ended with thinking about ways that multimodal writing can create social change. During the final exam period, students transformed the call to action from their essay into a work of protest art (see final exam prompt in [Supplementary Materials](#)). They could collage, paint, marker, or sew. Some wrote their messages in Spanish or Hmong, as appropriate to their chosen audience. Some drew stick people.

To complement their posters, students wrote artists' statements reflecting and rhetorically analyzing their artwork. These statements were the best writing I saw from students all semester. Their intentionality and purpose as artists and writers were striking: one modified the Tibetan flag to replace the snow lions with a silhouette of protesters; another drew a tear on the face of queer youth with the Hmong symbol for family. With an invitation from our campus archives, many students chose to donate their posters and artist statements, so, alongside the robust special collections on protest art, future visitors to our archives will be able to also see and hold the students' protest art.

Near the end of the term, students spent a full class period debating and designing the rubric for their poster and artists' statement (see rubric in [Supplementary Materials](#)). While students had been writing for my rubric all term, it was a fitting capstone for the course to give them an opportunity to take ownership by evaluating the quality of their own work.

Future Work

I could imagine adapting this assignment in a variety of contexts to reflect the particularities of community: working with local artists, maybe even inviting them to visit the course to discuss their inspiration or process; choosing topics that are more narrowly focused to the geographical/cultural/environmental contexts of particular communities; or considering other media, perhaps by having students design their own sculptures to critically explore local memorials, or create digital texts to consider social media and online communities. I could imagine a course like this co-taught with faculty in writing/English and art, or as a more explicit community engagement course working with particular community organizations as co-researchers or audiences for student work. I could imagine students completing the project in small teams rather than individuals to heighten the emphasis on collaboration. I could imagine challenging students to do the work of enacting their own call to action.

In fall 2020, we studied the George Floyd Memorial⁶ and Say Their Names Cemetery⁷ as examples of local protest art. Many of my students are from Minneapolis, and many started college this fall having experienced racialized trauma, and also having participated in protests. This urgency (along with social distancing requirements) shifted our focus from physical artwork in our archives to protest art posted on artists' social media pages in response to the pandemic, the election, and BLM. Artist-activist LMNOPI led a virtual conversation about her process and purpose and the role of protest and art in American democracy.⁸ Students contributed to a visiting policy-driven art installation called "Hostile Terrain 94." Before viewing the

immigration-themed protest art in our archives, students filled out virtual toe tags, which will be used in the Hostile Terrain 94 exhibit when it opens spring 2021, to commemorate migrants who have died trying to cross the US/Mexico border.⁹ In small groups, we also visited our campus art museum to tour a stunning exhibit by New Orleans artists Chandra McCormick and Keith Calhoun. After their studio flooded during Katrina, they recovered and reframed their moldy, cracked, and waterlogged photographs as abstract art. Both the images themselves and the process of their re-creation are a testament, they argue, to the resiliency of the city’s Black community in the wake of Katrina and in the face of new challenges during the pandemic.

The concept of “process” creates a meaningful link between efforts to seek social justice and the process of writing. We are all of us, me included, improving as writers and growing as people, making our words a little bit better and our world a little more just. Reimagining the “standard” college research paper provides a unique opportunity to develop students’ sense of local agency, community engagement, creativity, self-expression, and personal authority in pursuit of a more just world, and it helps them see writing as itself an act of social change.

ASSIGNMENT

Research Paper: Protest Art & Social Change

For your final paper, we will be returning to the idea of memorials, if we think about the ways that archives can serve as memorials of people, groups, and events. Like any other memorial, archives are complicated sites of memory and power, where the agency to preserve and tell one’s own story is a privilege afforded to the few, but also where our broader cultural memories and values are captured and honored in a meaningful way. More specifically, you will be looking at archival collections on artist activist books, or protest art. These works of art will serve as one of a variety of source types you’ll use to make a larger argument about the issue they address.

The goal of this paper is to connect the tasks you’ve done in essays 1-4 (stating an opinion, analyzing texts, responding to opinions, synthesizing outside research) into a final culminating essay. In this paper, you will be taking a stand on a controversial issue, and use a variety of sources (peer reviewed and popular, primary and secondary, data and art) to support your opinion on that issue.

1. You will begin your essay by telling a story about an issue that brings it locally to St. Olaf College, Northfield, Minnesota, or another “home space” of your choice. What is exciting, resonant, or important about this story to that community? Identify a specific local audience for your paper, convince them of the stakes, and establish your opinion.
2. Then, in the body of your paper, you will broaden the topic, shifting from its local ramifications to national or even international scale. In order to contextualize the issue and support your opinion, you should rely on a variety of rhetorical tools and a variety of types of evidence, including:
 - a. At least one **work of protest art from special collections** (note: you will want to research the artist to understand their role and interest in this movement along with the time, place, and audience that contextualizes their work).
 - b. At least one local, digitized source (St. Olaf College Archives Online, *St. Olaf Messenger* online, campus yearbooks, local newspaper, etc.; see the course libguide)
 - c. At least one popular source (magazine, newspaper, etc.)

- d. At least one scholarly reference book
- e. At least one peer-reviewed scholarly source
- f. Evidence from your own experience

Your argument should synthesize these sources into a scholarly conversation, but put your voice (including your argument and your experience) at the forefront. You may use the synthesis matrix handout to help you.

3. Finally, you will end with a call to action, proposing a **specific local action** that your audience can take to make a change. The change could be an individual mandate or a community effort, but it should be a specific, local goal that you can demonstrate will be both meaningful and achievable.

As you prepare for this project, we will have library sessions on academic research and archival research. While library research is maybe more strategic and intentional, archival research is maybe more exploratory and serendipitous. You'll need to model skills in both these areas to succeed in this essay. Please take advantage of library staff, including Jillian Sparks and Maggie Epstein, in addition to your writing and research tutor and me, as you gather and interpret sources.

Guidelines: You will be expected to follow a writing process, and I will consider your process in my evaluation. A well-developed essay will be approximately 4-5 pages (1000-1250 words). Your essay should be typed, double spaced, with your name and date at the top. Be sure to include an effective title that highlights the main idea of your argument. Use MLA guidelines for citation. Be sure to double check any auto-generated citations, and use *Easy Writer* for instructions on unusual source types like a work of art (p. 154) or unpublished work (p. 156).

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Notes

¹Of course, we could see this combination not as unexpected, but actually predictable, if we recall Judith Butler’s (1999) preface to *Gender Trouble*, which reminds us that “It would be a mistake to think that received grammar is the best vehicle for expressing radical views, given the constraints that grammar imposes upon thought, indeed, upon the thinkable itself. . . . If gender [or insert your socially-inscribed hierarchy of choice here] itself is naturalized through grammatical norms, as Monique Wittig has argued, then the alteration of gender at the most fundamental epistemic level will be conducted, in part, through contesting the grammar in which gender is given” (p. xix-xx). Thanks to Abby Benusa for steering me to this quote.

²While Shipka (2011) embraces the notion of multimodality as “routine,” Shipka is eager to separate the broad and inclusive concept of multimodality from modalities that are exclusively technological or “textually overdetermined,” in favor of a more process-oriented understanding of the concept. “We must attend,” she writes, “to the dynamic, emergent, distributed, historical, and technologically mediated dimensions of composing processes” along with the means and modes of production (p. 14). She advocates for empowering students to choose their own writing goals and

modalities and to “assume responsibility for evaluating, describing, and sharing with others the purposes and potentials of their work” (p. 16). This idea of asking students to “account” for their “rhetorical objectives and... choices” (p. 16) fits nicely with the final element of my assignment described here, which asks students to create and rhetorically analyze a piece of protest art, though giving students more autonomy in choosing their own modality would better suit Shipka’s model.

³For excellent work on the interconnectedness of multimodality and multilingualism, see Shipka (2016).

⁴Writing 110 Writing and Research Tutors are cross-trained by me, the writing center director, and a research librarian, and are typically students who have taken Writing 110 themselves.

⁵Minneapolis/St. Paul is one of the largest Hmong communities in the world, as a result of refugee resettlement after the Vietnam War. LGBTQ acceptance in the Hmong community remains low, though I learned from this student that St. Paul has been described as a “gay mecca” for LGBTQ Hmong youth.

⁶This informal community memorial was created at the site in Minneapolis where George Floyd was murdered, and includes murals, a sculpture of a black power fist, signs, flowers, and other ephemera.

⁷Anna Barber and Connor Wright’s “Say Their Names Cemetery” is a collection of 100 headstones with the names of African Americans killed by police. The cemetery fills an open park space in Minneapolis near the site of George Floyd’s murder; the white rows are reminiscent of Arlington Cemetery but are each marked with a black power fist.

⁸LMNOPI is an American painter, printmaker, and street activist whose portraits and murals highlight leaders of social justice movements (“LMNOPI,” n.d.).

⁹Learn more about Hostile Terrain 94 from Gomez (2020) and from “Undocumented Migration Project: Background” (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.v5i1.74>.

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Social Justice and Corporate Mission Statements

Analyzing Values in Business Writing

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Abstract

This article describes and reflects on a collaborative, in-class activity that asks students in a business writing course to analyze the intersection of language, values, and social justice through a rhetorical analysis of corporate mission statements. The activity looks at how mission statements, as a genre, work to construct an ethos of civic engagement targeting a specific audience. Students reflect on values embedded in mission statements and compare these values with corporate action. Students then work in groups to create their own mission statements that direct their research and teamwork for their other, collaborative course projects. I offer this activity focused on mission statements as a concrete way to discuss social justice, values, and civic engagement in a business writing course; specifically, students explore how language impacts social justice and structural (in)equality.

Teaching ethical communication is a decades-old concern of business curriculum (e.g., Edwards, 2018, McDonald and Donleavy, 1995, Rentz and Debs, 1987, and Speck, 1990). However, integrating discussions of ethics and social justice in a meaningful way is challenging, and the best approach is a matter for debate (McDonald & Donleavy, 1995; Shelton, 2020; Speck, 1990). This challenge is heightened within a field whose communication practices are traditionally framed as oppositional to (or removed from) ethics (Speck, 1990). In my own experience, students often view ethics in narrow terms of direct deception. For example, students easily understand ethics surrounding misinformation, as shown in Huff's (2004) "How to Lie with Statistics," or access, as in Siegel's (2004) "The Plain English Revolution." This narrow understanding of ethics restricts teaching ethical communication to specific genres, like leases or term agreements. This view of ethics hinges on clarity and honesty being relegated to specific genres.

But where do conversations about ethical communication intersect more broadly with the role that all communication plays in shaping values? How do we move beyond "not deceptive" towards framing ethical communication in terms of positive action and social justice? The activity I describe here—analyzing corporate mission statements—is one attempt to make social justice, ethics, and values more immediately tangible for business writing students. I use rhetorical analysis of mission statements to frame all business writing as inherently engaged in matters of social justice.

Course Context and Activity Overview

Analyzing Corporate Mission Statements

In this ungraded, in-class activity in an advanced business writing course, I ask students to collaboratively analyze corporate mission statements and then create their own mission statement that informs group projects throughout the semester. I limit the activity to corporations, as opposed to nonprofits, because students often describe nonprofits as more obviously interested in social justice and corporations as more "removed" from social justice. As such, we focus on

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corporations to frame seemingly “apolitical” organizations as implicated and engaged in social justice.

Students work in groups of five and maintain these groups all semester. This activity falls during the second week of the semester so that 1) students have already been introduced to the concept of rhetorical analysis and 2) students’ introduction to group work emphasizes language as value-laden. After assigning groups, I lead the class through a collective mission statement analysis. Students suggest corporations (such as Nike), and, from their websites, we note how easy it is to find the mission statement, its location, content, and the use of colors, font, and images. I review the components of the rhetorical situation and the appeals of ethos, pathos, and logos; during this discussion students use such terminology introduced over previous class periods.

Next, we discuss mission statements as a genre. I ask students what they think mission statements *do*: who is their intended audience? What is their purpose? Then, we begin a conversation about values and social justice. We consider whether and how these organizations are concerned with social justice. We discuss the terms ethics, values, and social justice and use shared readings¹ to help define and situate these terms. I then ask students to discuss with their groups the following questions: what values do you see reflected in these mission statements? How are these values consistent with organizational practices? How are mission statements engaged in (or disengaged from) social justice? After this discussion, students work with their groups to complete the activity described below, which carries over into the next class period.

General Course Description and Demographics

I developed this activity for an advanced business writing course offered each semester at the University of Minnesota (U of M). I write from my own experience teaching this course at the University of Minnesota, located in Minneapolis, which has historically and recently been a center for both social justice activism and for racial inequities, large opportunity gaps, and violence. Social justice, as a term and a tangible concept, has been more immediately accessible for my students and has yielded more fruitful and passionate discussions than our conversations about ethics (in particular, business ethics). The university is a central part of this city’s history and current reality; students at this and other Twin Cities universities are often actively engaged in protests and politics, and student groups have pushed to keep the university accountable. For example, U of M students were instrumental in pushing for university building name changes and the university president’s recent decision to cut ties with the Minneapolis Police Department in response to the murder of George Floyd.

Not all students are engaged in *social justice*, and some are resistant to these conversations, but most are familiar with the term and can bring some of their own experiences to our conversations. My use of *social justice*, in this course and for this activity, exists in this context, and is accompanied by assigned readings such as “The Social Justice Turn” (Haas & Eble, 2018b). Our department offers three to four sections each semester, either online or onsite, which cap at 24 students and fill quickly. For some students, it is the only upper division writing course that they are required to take, and it fulfills a Writing Intensive requirement that all majors must complete. Because of how quickly the course fills, the class is typically composed of juniors and seniors.

As I mentioned above, I emphasize a rhetorical approach to business communication and work with students to challenge notions of business communication as “objective” or “neutral.” I move through genres that students agree (based on informal class brainstorming and discussion) are more “engaged in” and “removed from” values, politics, ethics, or pathos, and then examine language usage. Our discussions highlight how even more objective genres rely on ethos, pathos,

and values in order to persuade. One example that has recently resonated with students involves Nike’s use of social justice in its sponsorship and branding. Students are already familiar with the brand and controversy,² so we analyze their mission statement, focusing specifically on how Nike uses language to highlight corporate and community values. We then search other pages on their website to see where such language is repeated or how Nike uses language, more generally, to echo values. I ask students to reflect on how various genres are more explicit or implicit in their engagement in social justice, and we trouble the familiar notion of “objective” and “subjective” in various genres. We continue to discuss, as we work through each genre and assignment throughout the semester, how business writing is particularly important when we consider how language shapes values and how individuals and organizations engage in social justice.

This early activity, with its direct focus on social justice and collaboration, is important to understand within the context of other, major course assignments. These include discussion presentations, a problem-solving/complaint email, a corporate website revision memo, and a formal business proposal and presentation. Three of these assignments are collaborative, and students practice specific genres and work in teams. This first activity combines rhetorical analysis with working in teams while asking students to actively reflect on their team approach. This reflection affects how students approach each collaborative assignment. Further, this activity emphasizes language as the construction of values. So, students are at once analyzing how corporations do this work of articulating and operationalizing values, and also reflecting on how their own values will show up in their writing over the rest of the semester.

Activity Origins and Development

I first developed this activity several years ago after reading Speck (1990), who describes an activity in which he asks business students to create codes of ethics after reading various sample professional codes of ethics. His activity is grounded in the assumption that students do not see a clear connection between business writing and ethics and that focusing on a specific “real life” genre makes business ethics more tangible. While teaching this class in 2015, I used Speck’s activity and had students research and then develop codes of ethics that would inform their group projects. I later developed my own activity with three major changes: a genre shift to mission statements; a change of focus from ethics to social justice; and, finally, an added focus on values and rhetorical analysis that frames all business communication as value-laden.

I find that mission statements work better than codes of ethics because they are a more familiar and public-facing genre. Further, mission statements allow for an easy discussion of multimodality and visual rhetoric because they live on corporate websites and use images, font, color, and sound alongside text. Finally, as many corporations have explicitly worked to incorporate social justice into their identities, this short, accessible genre provides a good starting point for discussing language and value construction in texts that are less obviously engaged in social justice and ethics (what students often describe as objective or neutral genres).

Students discuss how corporations create implicit and explicit ethical contracts with consumers and investigate whether corporations abide by these implicit contracts. Mission statements construct corporate identity; students consider whether this identity aligns with action. Shelton (2020) describes social justice as a means “to disrupt a pattern that values the myths of neutrality, objectivity, and the apolitical impact of technical and professional communication” (p. 2), which I ask students to consider during this activity. Mission statements are gateways to these types of important conversations that examine not only how corporations act in the world but how the texts they produce impact various stakeholders as well as corporate culture

and values at large.

This activity frames mission statements as an example of an informal contract between a corporation and its stakeholders: mission statements make promises and build trust with the reader. We use this genre to then discuss how corporations create contracts in all of their written communication, how linguistic contracts build relationships, and how language creates values. This activity developed out of a need to frame business writing as value-laden; while my students are often interested in ethics and social justice, they also tend to compartmentalize texts as political/apolitical, or as biased/objective. Speck (1990) insists that “language is inevitably laden with values, and the expression of those values helps shape behavioral expectations and actual behaviors” (p. 21). This activity asks students to unearth values expressed in organizational mission statements by framing language as “inevitably laden with values”; after practicing rhetorical analysis and discussion of value-laden language with mission statements, it becomes easier to map that conversation onto other kinds of business writing.

In addition to shifting from codes of ethics to mission statements, I shifted this activity’s focus from ethics to social justice both in response to such articles as “Shifting Out of Neutral” (Shelton, 2020) and “The Social Justice Turn” (Haas & Eble, 2018b) and in response to my students’ expressed interest in social justice. Shelton (2020) describes the difference between representation and inclusion, asking “what it means to really *include* difference—as opposed to simply representing difference numerically or visually” (p. 1). During this activity, I ask students to consider the distinction between representation and inclusion, as mission statements (representation) are weighed against corporate action (inclusion). Further, while Shelton argues that experience is firmly rooted in identity, and inclusion must consider distinct and marginalized identities, this activity examines corporate identities and, indirectly, audience identities through a discussion of values and civic engagement. Students consider who is included and who is left out, and what impacts such corporate values might have on various groups.

I have found that my conversations with students about ethics quickly become abstract: students are familiar with the concept of ethical dilemmas and hypothetical considerations. Or, students often frame ethics as highly personal and subjective. Students associate, overall, ethics with worldviews, and articulate that folks possess a variety of worldviews. (Similarly, students tend to tie ethics to religion or morality.). Finally, student conversations about ethics focus on deficit: students know that it is not okay to behave unethically, but struggle to name what it means to behave ethically.

Unlike the deficit model of ethics, my students tend to frame social justice as active: they describe social justice as something a company *does*. Shifting from conversations about ethics to conversations about social justice has helped me to shift from a deficit framework to a positive one: instead of “how can we avoid unethical language?” the question becomes “how can we use language to engage in social justice?”

While I continue to grapple with the relationship and difference between teaching “ethics” and teaching “social justice” in a business communication course, this activity has helped me to shape the rest of the semester’s conversations around that important question: “how can we use language to engage in social justice?” This shift in framing language, and particularly business communication, with that question is representative of an important shift in how students recognize even apparently neutral language as always either perpetuating or dismantling social structures and community values. Students can then better examine and make choices about how they make meaning in the world and how they also either perpetuate or work towards dismantling values and assumptions that are in conflict with their own values. This activity alone does not do this work, but I consider it a piece of this continuous work we do with our students. Frequent reflective conversations with students and gestures back to this activity and

assigned readings build on this foundation throughout the semester.

Student Feedback and Response

Each semester I revise many activities; however, because students have enjoyed this activity, it has carried over from previous semesters. I have added course readings (such as the Speck, Haas and Eble, and Shelton pieces cited above) and developed the in-class framing discussion. I have also revised the activity to emphasize course-long collaboration and adjusted its timing: I initially conducted this activity later in the semester, during our course unit on ethics. I find that it works better earlier in the semester, as a way to introduce group work and key course concepts.

Informally, I observe that creating these collaborative mission statements help to set the tone for group work and, generally, help future collaboration run more smoothly. When students work together to explicitly name values—such as clear and timely communication or equal division of responsibility—there is less likelihood of a group member failing to pull their weight or failing to communicate. Further, if a problem does arise regarding the group dynamic, students have a specific document to turn to that can then provide a foundation for how to handle various roadblocks. Overall, creating these mission statements help students to feel invested not only in an individual group project, but invested in and accountable to their group.

In the future, I will incorporate additional recent literature. While keeping the core components of the activity intact, new publications shape how I frame class conversations about social justice, ethics, and business communication.

Future Application Across Contexts

This activity could be useful not only for business and professional writing courses, but in any course that engages group identity, language, and ethics. As I have adapted this activity from one that asks students to read and write codes of ethics, I imagine that this activity could be adapted to fit the content of various courses. Mission statements work well as a genre for analysis in business communication, but one could reframe this activity to analyze a variety of genres, across fields, that articulate group values, identity, and social justice. I encourage instructors to ask their students to specifically consider how language is always engaged in constructing, shaping, or perpetuating values, and how these values are (or are not) taken up and promoted.

In my experience of teaching writing to undergraduates across a wide range of majors, students often categorize writing as either biased (which they agree is inappropriate in academic, scientific, or business writing) or unbiased (which is often seen as the goal for academic, scientific, or business writing). This assignment helps to challenge the simple categories of biased and unbiased and instead shifts the conversation towards shared values. This activity opens up conversations about language and group values and begins discussions about social justice. Because these are broad conversations appropriate in any course that asks students to write or research, this activity can be adjusted to specific course content and facilitate genre and discipline-specific conversations about language and values.

While this activity can be reworked to frame various common genres across fields, the mission statement is itself adaptable for a variety of courses, because this genre *does* exist in so many distinct disciplines, fields, and types of organizations. For example, a biology course might locate mission statements from biology departments or related organizations, in part to recognize how such public-facing statements construct disciplinary values and in part to discuss corporatization of various fields (depending on what discussions are appropriate for that course focus). After analyzing mission statements, students could analyze other common genres that

their field frames as “value neutral” or “objective” and consider how even these texts construct values; how they are engaged in social justice; and how they represent ethics. Adapting this activity to look at field- or discipline-specific organizations can help students apply questions about language and values to various genres. For example, students across disciplines can follow this activity by analyzing any number of commonplace texts and asking: How do these texts construct worldviews? How do they fit into our conversations about language and social justice? Based on an analysis of such texts, what does our field value?

ASSIGNMENT

Activity: Analyzing Corporate Mission Statements

Overview

Mission statements are important ways in which organizations build ethos and appeal to a specific audience. They are brief and public, often readily available and highlighted on organizational websites, and are meant to reflect the organization’s values, goals, and practices. Mission statements tell us quite a bit regarding not only what an organization *believes*, but also regarding what an organization *believes about its target audience*.

The target audiences for mission statements, in this case consumers, investors, or potential employees, are often concerned with an organization’s values, priorities, and commitment to social justice. Mission statements may not explicitly address civic engagement, but they state values and signal a commitment to social justice at an organizational level.

What You Need to Do

Working with your group, find a mission statement for an organization or corporation that you wish to analyze. Consider our readings and class discussions on ethics and social justice as well as our discussions of the rhetorical situation. Additionally, pay attention to how graphics and images work alongside text.

Once you have chosen an organization and located its mission statement, reflect on the following questions:

1. Based on the mission statement, what seems to be the organization’s core values?
2. What are the key words or phrases deployed in the mission statement, and how do these words align with certain values?
3. How easy was it to locate the mission statement? Where is it located?
4. How are images used alongside the text, and what values do those images evoke?
5. How would you describe the ethos that this mission statement constructs?
6. Based on your analysis of the mission statement, how has this organization constructed its target audience? Who is their audience, and what does this audience care about? Who is considered and who is left out?

After analyzing the mission statements, do some basic research on the organization. You can search the rest of their website, or search for articles about their practices and ethics. After doing some cursory research (nothing in-depth, just what you can find in 10-15 minutes), reflect on the following questions:

1. Do the organization’s actions seem to align with their mission statement? Why or why not? Try to be as specific as possible.

2. Does the organization seem to value civic engagement? What led you to this conclusion?
3. Are there any instances in which the organization seems to be acting in direct opposition to the ethos its mission statement constructs?
4. Does the organization donate to any other organizations that do or do not reflect their stated values?
5. (Please note that you may not be able to answer each of these questions: it is still useful to discuss these questions even if the answer is “we don’t know” because it was difficult to find this information.)
6. After each group has completed parts 1-3, share what you’ve discovered with the class. Were there any major conflicts among organizational mission statements and organizational practices? How did the mission statements you analyzed construct a target audience? What values were you able to identify?

Looking ahead: the last major assignment for this course is a collaborative business proposal. As a group, you not only have to develop this proposal, you also have to construct a clear professional “identity” or “voice” based around shared values. Now that you’ve had some practice analyzing mission statements, construct your own group mission statement for your imagined organization. As you draft your mission statement, consider how the values expressed in it will guide your business proposal and your research.

As a group, consider:

1. What things do you value?
2. How will your proposal AND the way that you work together as a team actively reflect those values?

Notes

¹These readings change from semester to semester, but I often assign “The Social Justice Turn,” from *Key Theoretical Frameworks* (Haas & Eble, 2018a), as noted below.

²While there have many several Nike controversies to examine, we discuss the bad press that Nike received in the 1990s and again around 2012 regarding sweatshops and child labor. Nike has since been accused of abusive labor practices, more generally, in its manufacturing. We discuss Nike and the brand’s reputation related to labor and compare that to how Nike has “leaned in” to the controversy surrounding the corporation’s open support of Black Lives Matter and their 2018 ad featuring Colin Kaepernick.

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.v5i1.72>.

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Respecting, Embracing, and Honoring Cultural Practices through Collective Storytelling

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Abstract

This article discusses a final writing assignment for “Culturally Responsive Service Learning,” a course taught during a four-week experiential education program in rural Fiji. This elective course was situated in an undergraduate teacher preparation program but included students from a wide variety of disciplines and majors. This article discusses the theoretical and cultural framework for the assignment, the pedagogical decisions that led to the final paper, the process of sharing the assignment with the community through a public event, the limitations of using a storytelling framework from another culture, and suggestions for future adaptations. In alignment with the topic, the author uses two different voices to interweave personal storytelling with academic research. The article opens and closes with vignettes that demonstrate how the class arrived at new levels of critical consciousness through engagement with the readings and learning from Indigenous community partners. The body of this article is written in a traditional academic format. Storied vignettes are italicized for clarity.

Vignette 1: Learning from Nabobo-Baba and the Students

The rooster crows, the insects hum, and the ocean waves lap gently against the shore. Hues of pink and orange make their way over the treetops to signal a new day. There is a gentle coolness in the air, one that will soon disappear in the heat of the day. It’s almost 6:00 AM, and I walk quietly down the dirt road trying not to wake my students, colleagues, and local friends—or force the morning along any faster than it will go.

I grab a cup of coffee and walk towards the ocean. Near the shore, I bump into Ann—her big Bible in one hand and a cup of coffee in the other. Ann Cooper, my beloved mentor and friend, joined us on this trip as my co-leader. Ann had taken me to Fiji several times as a student teacher, classroom teacher, and graduate researcher. Ann has worked in Fiji for over fifteen years, and she has an honorable reputation across the nation. She is the founder of the Fiji Kinde Project, a non-profit organization that promotes and supports early childhood education throughout the country. Seeing her, I smile as I am reminded what a gift it is to share this month-long adventure with her.

“Yadra,¹ Elizabeth,” she calls to me with her gentle Texas drawl.

“Good morning, Ann.” She sets her coffee down on a small wooden table. I take a seat next to her, and we look out at the glassy sea as the water changes colors with the sunrise.

Ann smiles. “I have some exciting news. The headman from Vinikura, Paulo, invited you and me to go to the high chief’s house tomorrow. He said he will arrange the transportation

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for us and accompany us on the journey. Paulo said that his Uncle Jon, the high chief, wants to show us the magic rocks. He said there are stories about the rocks that he wants us to write down for the children. He heard about the Fiji Kinde Project, and he heard you are a researcher. So, he invited us both to go to his home in Dakuniba tomorrow to see the rocks. He wants us to audio record the stories, and he wants you to write them down. We will do a Sevu Sevu upon our arrival, and then we will share a meal. Then he takes us up to see the rocks.”

This is a surprising and wonderful invitation—being invited to a high chief’s house is rare, and, furthermore, I have heard of these rocks before—they are sacred and special. To be invited to see them alongside the high chief is an invitation of a lifetime. I feel my spirit leaping with enthusiasm and gratitude for this special initiation, but I also feel a tug of deep hesitation. As I look out at the water, I think to myself: Record the stories? Write them down? Preserve the stories for the children? My researcher mind swirls. How can I do this without IRB approval?

#

Later in the day, the students and I gather together for our class session. We meet in our classroom which consists of straw mats for us to sit on and a small whiteboard. Before the students arrive, I smile at my good fortune. Today’s lesson is based on chapter 2 of Nabobo-Baba’s *Knowing and Learning: An Indigenous Fijian Approach*. The chapter is titled “Undertaking Research in the Fijian Village.” I promise the students that class will end with a story of a researcher dilemma in which their input is needed. I do not disclose that the researcher is me.

We spend a few hours together unpacking the ideas in chapter 2, which introduces the concepts of vanua (community) research. The chapter rejects traditional, Western ways of conducting research and instead outlines vanua research procedures, protocols, and insider/outsider positionalities. Furthermore, the chapter discusses the differences between university and vanua expectations. These include the balance between subjective and objective, the concept of time, authority and consent, entry to the research area, approaches to research, and the ownership of research and knowledge. The students and I spend our class session unpacking these ideas through the creation of group artwork, dialogical poetry between the two voices of the university and the vanua, and through a lively class discussion about anti-colonial research practices.

As we reach the end of class, I share the story of what Ann told me this morning. I explain my invitation to visit the high chief with Ann and Paulo. I explain the offer to meet Uncle Jon, see the magic rocks, and record some of the oral history for the tribe to pass down to the children. I explain the reverence of the rocks, and the grandness of this invitation. The students’ faces light up with joy and delight at this unlikely opportunity.

But then, I tell them about IRB protocols, and how I do not have IRB approval to conduct this type of research, and so I might not be able to go. I explain to them that IRB approval is necessary when research involves human subjects and when seeking to write a publishable manuscript. Their faces shift from delight to disbelief, worry, and even disgust. A lively conversation follows.

“Why does the academy own you, Dr. Yo? Isn’t an invitation from the vanua more important than what the academy says?”

While I believe this is true and know deep down I would only need IRB approval if I planned to publish this work, I play devil’s advocate. “Well, I am employed by the university. Shouldn’t I respect its procedures and protocols?”

Another student chimes in. “You are still respecting them by respecting the people. It’s so frustrating that their expectations don’t meet the needs of the people here or in other places. How are you supposed to be here if you can’t really be here?”

The class nods in agreement. Hannah asks, “Are you afraid of breaking the rules?”

I ask them, “But what if I get in trouble? I feel compelled to honor the culture here and also follow the protocol for researchers.”

Hannah challenges me again, in all the right ways. “Well, who is your highest priority? Is it the people here or the sterile walls of the academy? Wouldn’t it be worth it to get in trouble in order to honor the wishes of this high chief? Who do you care about most?”

I smile because she knows the way to my heart—a deep love and reverent respect for the Fijians. “The people here,” I reply.

“Well,” she continues, “Then I think you have to accept the invitation to go see the magic rocks. I think you have to do all the things Nabobo-Baba is teaching us. I think you have to do it on behalf of all of us. This is your chance. This is our chance.”

I look around to see the whole class nodding in agreement. Out of respect for our learning community, I tell the students I will go—or not go—based on their vote. I ask them to consider all of today’s learning, all of the constraints, limitations, and possibilities of this invitation. I ask them to consider what is the most ethical, the most respectful, and the most culturally responsive.

When I ask them to vote, 20 of 20 students raise their hands in favor of honoring the vanua research framework by my visit to Uncle Jon’s this Saturday. The students voted unanimously in favor of the vanua research framework. I take a deep breath and nod in agreement. I would accept the invitation.

Assignment Development and Context

At my institution, study abroad programs are quite popular and serve as an important component of the campus culture and university experience. Semester- or year-long programs are offered in six different countries, and there are a wide variety of month-long summer intensive programs offered in different locations based on faculty expertise and global connections. Because of my previous experiences in Fiji as a student teacher, classroom teacher, and researcher, I was invited by my institution to lead a month-long study abroad program in rural Fiji. The program runs annually, and courses usually emphasize medicine because the living accommodations are on the same property as a medical clinic. Because I am a teacher educator, I developed a course titled “EDUC 592: Culturally Responsive Service Learning,” which focused on decolonizing education, learning from Indigenous perspectives, and reimagining how service learning can be done. In designing the course, I relied on experiential education (EE) theory (T. E. Smith et al., 2011) critical pedagogy (Breunig, 2005, 2011; Freire, 1972, 1994, 1997, 1998) and post-colonial theory (Bhabha, 1984; Said, 1978; Spivak, 1988) in designing the course.² The program was offered as an elective in the teacher preparation program, but students from a wide variety of majors were welcomed. Twenty students participated.

In Fiji, students assisted in local classrooms, observed in a medical clinic, performed manual labor on a farm, and participated in service projects in local villages. Students rotated through each activity regardless of major or future career aspirations, and we placed an emphasis on unity, collaboration, connectedness, and teamwork in alignment with *iTaukei* (Indigenous Fijian) values. In addition to morning and afternoon fieldwork rotations, we had class two or three days per week for two-and-a-half or three-hour blocks. During this time, we used the text *Knowing and*

Learning: An Indigenous Fijian Approach (Nabobo-Baba, 2006) to center the course on Indigenous voices, knowledge, and perspectives. In addition to the course text, Indigenous voices were included through guest lectures, field trips, and hands-on experiences.³ The purpose of these course elements was to share power and embody allyship (Anthony-Stevens, 2017). Course learning objectives stated students would:

- apply Indigenous epistemologies to daily service-learning practices;
- interrogate their own personal identity, ways of knowing and belonging, and personal faith in connection to iTaukei culture;
- participate in cultural activities and host a co-constructed Talanoa event; and
- identify strategies for culturally responsive allyship to Indigenous people and/or people of marginalized groups.

The assignment presented here served as one of three components of the final exam.

- Part I: Oral Exam: Each student had an oral exam that lasted between 15-30 minutes. The students were given the questions ahead of time and were allowed to use notes during the exam. The questions asked them to reflect holistically on the experience and apply academic concepts in a variety of ways.
- Part II: Creative Talanoa Writing: Students were asked to write their stories (see prompt at the end of the paper). Students read their stories in both our classroom setting and at a community event.
- Part III: Academic Response: Students also provided an explanation for how their stories connected to course themes, concepts, learning objectives, and new ways of processing information.

Here, I focus on Part II of the assignment, the construction and sharing of the talanoa. The talanoa, a creative writing assignment, was a critical component of the final experience. Throughout the course, the concept of talanoa (Farrelly & Nabobo-Baba, 2014) was embedded into each class session and in many informal ways throughout the experience. Talanoa is defined as:

talking about nothing in particular, chat, or gossip and it is within the cultural milieu of talanoa that knowledge and emotions are shared... a holistic and embodied amalgamation of the emotions, knowledge, interests, and experiences. Values such as empathy, respect, love and humility are essential to the vanua [community] as indigenous worldview. Talanoa is an embodied expression of the *vanua* concept (Farrelly & Nabobo-Baba, 2012, p. 1).

Talanoa is often used as a social science research methodology in Pacific contexts to reflect the lived experiences of the research participants (Fa'avae et al., 2016). While we did not employ talanoa as a research methodology, we relied on talanoa as a pedagogy. The text discusses the concept of talanoa, so we used this as a springboard to engage in storytelling as a tool of connection, sense making, and listening.

In our Western context, we are often asked to show new understandings in formulaic ways that remove the humanity from the process of learning. As a former K-12 classroom teacher and current teacher educator, I often feel pressured to have my students write in ways that are overly mechanical, detailed, and academic. When I first learned about talanoa, I was intrigued: could there be a legitimate way to make sense of the world that included me, as a whole being? While there are many cultural protocols, nuances, and specific details that are involved in the complex process of talanoa (Farrelly & Nabobo-Baba, 2014), our attempt to apply this concept

to our learning was an invitation to link content and emotions, feelings, and lived experiences. After receiving permission from the residents of Fiji to use talanoa, we had a framework to reconnect our souls with the process of learning. The students and I were apprentices of talanoa; we would never hold the posture of experts because we were outsiders.

It is important to note that talanoa is not ours to take; in fact, permission to participate in talanoa must be continually pursued. It is only upon the granting of permission that we, as outsiders, can use talanoa as a framework to sense-make our experiences. I regularly asked local iTaukei friends for permission to use the concept of talanoa in our learning. I shared the process of asking permission with the students as a model for culturally responsive action (Berryman et al., 2013) and cultural humility (SooHoo, 2013). Furthermore, we had to be very intentional in order to resist cultural appropriation. As Oluo (2019) defined, cultural appropriation is “the adoption or exploitation of another culture by a more dominant culture” (p. 146). Oluo (2019) continued to explain the main issue of cultural appropriation. She stated:

The problem of cultural appropriation is not the desire to participate in aspects of a different culture that you admire. The problem of cultural appropriation is primarily linked to the power imbalance between the culture doing the appropriating and the culture being appropriated. The power imbalance allows the culture being appropriated to be distorted and redefined by the dominant culture and siphons any material or financial benefit of that piece of culture away to the dominant culture, while marginalized cultures are still persecuted for living in that culture. (p. 147)

I resist cultural appropriation and model this resistance to students. In Fiji, we intentionally learned in a storytelling format that is connected to the Fijian culture. I wanted to show our local partners that we honor their culture and value the epistemologies that the stories reveal. Navigating these terrains is complicated, and I am certain I did it imperfectly. I attempted to resist cultural appropriation primarily through:

1. **Continual dialogue with the students about cultural appropriation in connection to talanoa.** I shared my thoughts about my desire to participate in cultural practices, although we were outsiders. We talked about what actions, thoughts, or ideas would “cross the line” and convert our attempts of honoring culture to appropriating culture. We discussed how we must be ready to make a pivot at any time, and that we must continually posture ourselves as learners of the Fijian culture rather than experts.
2. **Asking for permission from field partners, friends, and community leaders.** By continually asking for permission, attempting to understand talanoa as a component of Fijian culture, and maintaining cultural humanity (SooHoo, 2013), we aimed to resist cultural appropriation. If the status of our permission changed, the course format and structure would change immediately. Should our engagement in talanoa be seen as offensive or intrusive, we would stop, and I would admit the mistake, apologize for it, and make amends. I would also share this experience with students.
3. **Learning with an Indigenous course text.** *Knowing and Learning: An Indigenous Fijian Approach* (Nabobo-Baba, 2006) explained in great detail how talanoa functions as an Indigenous research methodology. Through Nabobo-Baba’s detailed explanation of the procedures, protocols, and common practices, we were exposed to cultural knowledge about talanoa. This allowed for us to compare and contrast our own systems of knowledge, ways of sense making, and means of

connecting. The students often marveled at the beauty of talanoa in Fiji, and they were disappointed by the lack of connection in the United States due to stressful busyness, individualistic values, and hegemonic knowledge. In holding the posture of a learner and viewing talanoa from a cultural wealth mindset (Yosso, 2005), we resisted cultural appropriation.

While talanoa is primarily oral, our class participated in oral and written storytelling. Each class session opened and closed with talanoa, and talanoa was used for assignments and then shared during class. Bryan (2012) noted that “we are our stories. Each of us has a personal narrative careening around in the head, a library of personal drama, waiting to be expressed... We cannot leave these stories behind when we enter a classroom or schoolhouse. They are an important part of who we are” (p. 161). Talanoa allowed us to explore personal histories, struggles, biases, and hope, and offered new understandings. Talanoa can also be used to explore funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992) and homegrown epistemologies (Bloomfield, 2013).

At the end of our time in Fiji, I wanted students to share a talanoa that was reflective of the experiential education program, pay honor and respect to the local culture, view Indigenous knowledge with reverent respect, and serve as a way of connecting the students and me with our local partners.

Our Talanoa Experience

To honor my work as a critical educator and to embody the spirit of Paulo Freire, I know that “I cannot be a teacher without exposing who I am” (Freire, 2000, p. 87). I must be vulnerable and share my own stories of struggle as I seek a lifetime of allyship in pursuit of “beloved community” (King & Washington, 1986, p. 55). I am inspired by Shor’s commentary on Freire’s work: “The empowering education Freire suggests is not a new data bank or doctrine delivered to students; it is, instead, a democratic and transformative relationship between students and teacher, teacher and learning, students and society” (Shor, 1993, p. 27). To embody these concepts, I opened or closed the class with a personal talanoa that connected to the themes of the learning experience for that day. I shared my own researcher insider/outsider perspectives and limitations (see creative vignettes), mistakes I made as a result of my own colonial thinking (L. T. Smith, 2012), and reflections on Indigenous knowledge and antiracist concepts. I also reflected on being culturally responsive in my life.

Sharing my stories of struggle and hope with course content built trust and connection between the students and me. Students were willing to share their own stories with great transparency and authenticity. Much to my delight, students met without me for talanoa during the evenings where they would talk and process emotions and experiences as a community. One contributing factor to the enthusiasm about talanoa and the strong connections between the students was a lack of digital technology in Fiji. Students left their laptops at home and did not have cell phone use. In a research study conducted as a part of this program, students commented that the lack of technology helped foster new and deep friendships.

On the day that our final talanoa took place, we engaged in a more formal talanoa called *veivosaki* (Farrelly & Nabobo-Baba, 2014). The students arrived with their composition notebooks, prepared to share their stories out loud with their classmates. We sat in our usual format in a circle on a straw mat and invited the other study abroad program chaperones to attend the session. The other chaperones included my husband, as well as Ann and David Cooper of the Fiji Kinde Project. The chaperones provided general comments to synthesize, summarize, and compliment the students on their collective work of mind and heart.

Each talanoa was powerful, well crafted, and highly personal. Following the talanoa experience and feedback from the chaperones, we discussed how we bring the ideas of talanoa, connection, and community back home. We also explored how our understandings could lead to allyship and beloved community.

Finally, the class selected five students to share their stories at our event to honor the community. Our selection criteria were stories that would transcend culture and be well received by our iTaukei friends. A few days later, the stories were the core of the community-honoring event. Students prepared small gift bags and cards for each member of the community. We also ordered flower crowns, prepared musical numbers, made arrangements for a snack, and organized a program. After receiving permission, we dressed in our traditional Fijian garb as a way of honoring the culture.

During the gathering, each student presented a community member with their gift, a card, and a story about something we learned from them. We adorned community members with flower crowns. After our musical numbers, we shared our stories. Many tears of happiness and love were shed by both the students and the iTaukei guests. We later learned that it is common for the iTaukei community to put on a program for the guests, which they had done for us a few nights before, but this was the first time that a group put on an event for them. We were proud of this and surprised when some of the guests asked for photocopies of our stories.

Limitations and Adaptations for New Contexts

As a narrative researcher and former middle school English teacher, the opportunity to share talanoa with my students and with the community was a lifetime highlight. It was fulfilling to see this prompt transform from an idea into a meaningful experience that facilitated rich learning and provided a space to honor all we had learned from our iTaukei partners and friends. However, one major limitation of this assignment is the assessment component.

While I did assess this assignment with a rubric out of obligation to the traditional grading scale used at my university, the rubric did not capture the full essence of this assessment and did not embody the totality of the experience. The rubric felt like a limiting factor rather than a beneficial tool. In the same way there were complexities in my role as a teacher/researcher using my skill set in a different context, I struggled to use a two-dimensional paper rubric for an experience that involved mind, body, spirit, and heart. In the future, I would prefer to use a credit/no credit grading scale or to implement labor-based grading contracts (Inoue, 2019) or specifications grading (Nilson, 2015). I am in the process of working with the university to reimagine the possibilities for assessment in future experiential education programs.

I am left with many questions about how traditional assessment could capture the essence of this experience. How does one measure this deeply personal and highly authentic experience in a rubric? How does one translate such a unique lived experience into a letter grade? As the instructor, I would like to allow their assessment and experiences to be liberated from numbers and grades. For other instructors who wish to construct a similar assignment in a different cultural context, I encourage a careful and critical analysis of the assessment component in order to encourage student creativity and provide the students with quality feedback in connection to the learning objectives. Assessment measures could be co-constructed alongside students and include criteria such as attitudes leading to intercultural awareness, intercultural sensitivity, willingness to take risks, openness to new experiences, and reflexivity.

Another limitation of this assignment is that we are not Indigenous Fijians, and our access to this prompt and format of talanoa was granted by local partners and friends. Talanoa or other Indigenous concepts are not ours to take. Even with permission, we must tread lightly,

continue to ask for permission, and hold this way of sense-making with the utmost respect and reverence. As outsiders, we must be ready to pivot at any point should the insiders of the community believe that we should not call our storytelling process “talanoa” or should they find it cultural appropriation. While these are not our intentions, we must be receptive, open, and humble to the local community’s perceptions and understanding.

For other faculty members who wish to replicate this assignment while teaching abroad, I recommend learning about the culture’s storytelling history and process. How do the people of the land tell their stories? Who has a right to tell stories? What role does storytelling play in society? Whose stories count, and whose stories are excluded? Learning about the oral and written history of storytelling may lead instructors to design assessments in alignment with the cultural context. I recommend connecting with local partners to collaborate on a community sharing experience. The students were motivated to craft meaningful and honorable stories because they knew they would ultimately be shared with the community. Relational integrity mattered to the students.

Furthermore, for faculty members who wish to create a similar assignment, a great deal of anti-racist, anti-colonial self-work is an essential precursor to this type of social justice teaching and learning. I cannot recommend a prescribed path for this endeavor, as it is highly personalized. For my story of becoming a social justice educator, see Yomantas (2020c). To see my story in a creative format, see Yomantas (2020b). In summary, the journey took intensive reading, critical self-reflection, frequent writing, and a continual interrogation of the self. For me, this is an ongoing journey; I attempt to walk further each and every day. I believe the transformation of my mind has led to the transformation of my actions and ways of being in the world. The continued cyclical pursuit of learning, unlearning, and consequently doing better is what I find valuable in both my professional and personal life.

For courses that are taught all around the globe, I recommend that instructors add more storytelling into their courses to illuminate content. This can take place in many forms. As Freire (1972) stated, “only through communication can human life hold meaning” (p. 77). Stories have the power to connect us. Through story creating, storytelling, and receiving stories we are able to better understand each other and make changes in our world. As instructors, our stories hold meaning, too. In order to connect with students, illuminate content, and restore humanity, we must bring ourselves into the classroom. It is both a springboard for transformative learning and a way to open the limitless possibilities for justice that only begin when we work together.

Vignette 2: Learning from the Paulos

While the stories about his magic rocks are too reverent to pen here, there is one aspect of our trip to Uncle Jon’s house that I must share—one that my students love, too. Our plan was to drive across a mountain to Uncle Jon’s village, where we would participate in a cultural consent ceremony called a “sevu sevu” that would grant us permission to enter, share a meal, and then go together to the rocks. It was going to be an exciting day. My questions about consent still lingered, but I tried to push them out of my mind.

Before our trip with Paulo, I learned that he is an avid critical pedagogue who has great experience leading workshops in Theatre of the Oppressed. As a critical educator myself, I laughed in sheer delight at the randomness of finding a Freirean educator in a rural village of the South Pacific. Paulo and I developed a rich friendship discussing Freire’s ideas and how they played out in his Theatre of the Oppressed workshops. When I learned that he did not own a copy of Pedagogy of the Oppressed, I told him I would give him mine. It was marked up, tattered, and well-loved from graduate school. On the day of our visit to

Dakuniba, I gifted Paulo the copy of the text. On the ride to Uncle Jon's house, Paulo kept Pedagogy of the Oppressed on his lap.

As we drove, my researcher consent questions still looped around and around in my mind. They nagged at me so much that I decided to bring it up. I told Paulo about my concerns about data collection without IRB permission. I was so concerned with the ethics of permissions that I started rambling about this to Paulo, and he waved Pedagogy of the Oppressed at me and shook his head. It was as if the two Paulos were giving me an important message.

"Elizabeth," he said. Paulo is a gentle man, but in this moment, he spoke to me firmly.

"Stop what you are saying. Just stop. The sevu sevu is the consent. The sevu sevu is everything. Stop with this other nonsense. Nothing else matters. The sevu sevu is the consent."

I sat back against the seat and relaxed my shoulders. I laughed to myself. The sevu sevu is the consent. The sevu sevu is the consent. The sevu sevu is the consent. These words echoed around my head. While I knew this to be true, I didn't believe it to be true until the Paulos graciously taught me this lesson. The vanua owns the consent, and consent is obtained with a sevu sevu ceremony. It is not obtained in the ways that I think it should be. I must yield to their ways.

With Paulo Freire in hand and Paulo in person to help me along the way, I inched closer to learning and unlearning what it means to be a teacher/researcher in Fiji, and honor and respect the Fijian people above all else. As we bumped along the rugged road, I smiled to myself and allowed Paulo's words to wash over me—"the sevu sevu is the consent..."

ASSIGNMENT

Culminating Storytelling Experience

Prompt

What aspects of iTaukei (Indigenous Fijian) knowledge and/or customs are you longing for in your life back home? Construct a written story that responds to this prompt. Your story will be shared during a community talanoa (storytelling) event.

Reflection Questions

1. What experience here made you realize you were longing for this?
2. What iTaukei knowledge is embodied in your longing? Cite specific examples from the text.
3. In what tangible ways will you embody these new understandings in your life back home?

Notes

¹Fijian "good morning" greeting

²For more information on the theoretical foundations of the course, see Yomantas (2020a).

³For more information on the design of the experience, see Yomantas (2020c).

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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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Writing for Clean Water and Sanitation

Accelerating Momentum Toward the UN Sustainable Development Goals Through Action Research

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Abstract

This action research assignment invites students to participate in the progress of the UN's Sustainable Development Goal #6 (SDG6) by contributing knowledge to two distinct public discourse communities: *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia* and *Consilience: The Journal of Sustainable Development*. SDG6 targets access to clean water and sanitation for all by the year 2030. But, in order to accomplish this, the rate of progress must accelerate dramatically. In small groups, students research an SDG6-related topic and improve a Wikipedia article to make it neutral, balanced, and organized in accordance with Wikipedia quality assessment standards. Simultaneously, students compose an opinion paper addressing SDG6 goals and targeting the cross-disciplinary audience of *Consilience: A Journal of Sustainable Development*. The project raises awareness of discourse communities while students make headway on SDG6 by publicly sharing their research. The assignment is adaptable to an extensive range of subject matter suitable in both face-to-face and online teaching platforms. Students reflect on their own connections and learn to empathize with others by analyzing how lack of access to potable water and sanitation causes suffering. Action research calls on students, thinking as global citizens, to be bold in creating a new and better world—a world where access to clean water and sanitation brings justice to all.

As the COVID-19 pandemic rolls on, the whole of humanity is rethinking social, economic, and environmental praxes. People see the need for change, and many groups are aware of the need for urgent progress toward both better human and planetary health. United Nations (UN) Secretary-General António Guterres (2019, September 24) has called for accelerated action toward the Sustainable Development Goals: “We need all hands on deck. We need to move together, in step with the world’s young people . . . to move faster and farther to reach our destination for people and planet” (para. 18). In 2015, the UN concretized a plan to shift the people and the planet Earth toward a truly sustainable future by formalizing 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to be achieved by 2030. One of these, SDG6, aims to “ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all.” The current rate of progress on SDG6, however, must double to reach its goal (Guterres, 2019, May 8). COVID-19 and other projected viruses, along with heightened awareness of systemic racism and other forms of xenophobia, have intensified the urgency.

Developing countries increasingly illustrate how deprivation of clean water and safe sanitation systems seriously threatens human potential because of the connection to socioeconomic stability and health (Grafton, 2017, p. 3037). For example, Adjei and Kyei (2013) found a high correlation between the rate of malaria and skin disease in rural Ghana, where there is extremely limited access to water and sanitation. Lack of access also disproportionately affects women and children. In many countries (e.g., Mauritania, Somalia, Yemen), women and children spend significant portions of their days fetching water at the expense of their health, safety, and education (Sorenson et al., 2011, p. 1523). In these ways, access to water and sanitation becomes

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an issue of human and planetary health; it needs to be decolonized, deracialized, demasculinized, and degendered.

This action research project invites students in a first-year composition course to make headway on the UN SDG6—access to cleaner water, higher quality sanitation, and sustainable hygiene systems—from two angles: a Wikipedia article edit and an opinion paper that targets an online academic journal. Participation in SDG6 engages students to address critical social and environmental issues, an important aspect of action research. With less than a decade to go to reach SDG6, students participate in meaning-making and creating knowledge through research, dialogue, writing, and publication as global citizens.

Access to clean water and adequate sanitation is a complex and far-reaching problem. Solutions are contentious, processes of relief are disputed, and consequences require critical attention. Today, nearly a third of the world’s population lacks access to safe drinking water, nearly half lacks access to soap and water for home-handwashing, and over a third lacks access to basic sanitation systems (United Nations: Department of Economic and Social Affairs. Sustainable Development., n.d.). In this project, students explore solutions to what Grafton (2017) calls a “wicked problem.” The spread of COVID-19 and other diseases, the current economic crisis and widening economic gap, the soaring refugee crisis, and climate change deeply coalesce with water and sanitation. Importantly, water and sanitation needs transcend political, economic, racial, ethnic, gender, and other systemic gatekeepers. In other words, “effects of water scarcity . . . are not uniform” (Grafton, 2017, p. 3024).

SDG6, then, also intersects with other SDGs in a way that is importantly “universal, interdependent and mutually reinforcing” (UN-Water, 2016, p. 8). The synergistic interconnections and interdependence among and between the SDGs advances progress overall. For instance, the introduction of a rope pump, a low-cost household groundwater pump, has increased sustainable water access in economically disadvantaged rural communities in parts of Asia, Latin America and Sub-Saharan Africa (Holtslag & McGill, 2017; MacCarthy et al., 2017). Having a functioning family well reduces the need to fetch water from distant community wells. This improved water access (SDG6) leads to reduced poverty (SDG1) because maintenance of the pumps becomes a source of income. Often, providers of pump maintenance are women. Increasing income opportunities for women advances gender equality (SDG5).

The water access in low-income rural areas also reduces the distance to fetch water. Water fetching is problematic for women and children in multiple ways, including minimizing their opportunities to receive an education (SDG4) due to the time involved in accessing water. Pickering and Davis (2012) found that a 15-minute reduction in time spent water fetching produces a “41% average relative reduction in diarrhea prevalence, improved anthropometric indicators of child nutritional status, and a 11% relative reduction in under-five child mortality” (p. 2391). These findings demonstrate how reducing time to fetch water connects to health and well-being (SDG3).

What is more, students grapple with systemic issues such as the commodification of water and sanitation, which disproportionately hijacks human rights of those already marginalized. At the same time, students look inward to reflect on what they can do within their own unique social contexts. During the project, students reflect on these discrepancies through low-stakes writing posts and class discussions. By exploring answers to questions such as how to decolonize, deracialize, demasculinize, and degender access to water and sanitation, students join the community of action researchers committed to transformation and knowledge for public benefit (Whitehead, 2019, p. 212). Thus, problems and solutions are explored both inwardly and outwardly, and students reflect on their connections to the global community.

At Soka University, the student body consists of approximately 40% international students.

My first-year composition course, which focuses on global citizenship, dedicates the second half of the semester to this action research project. Student diversity produces lively discussions on the interconnectedness of all people and the natural environment. We learn from our differences. Students share with each other what they are learning about their varied SDG6-related topics as well as personal experiences, reflections, and steps to improve water and sanitation. Through these dialogues, students make connections between the different water and sanitation topics their classmates are working on. The discussions heighten awareness of peoples and places where there is limited infrastructure for access to water and sanitation. In turn, students are motivated to make a difference in their home communities.

Assignment Overview

The project starts with readings that contextualize SDG6 within the framework of global citizenship. The first reading is an appeal to youth to have hope and resilience as “humankind confronts a vertiginous dynamic of change” (Esquivel & Ikeda, 2018, p. 1). In conjunction with the appeal, students explore Ikeda’s (2010) concepts of global citizenship education, in which he presents three key aspects:

- the wisdom to perceive the interconnectedness of all life and living;
- the courage not to fear or deny difference, but to respect and strive to understand people of different cultures, and to grow from encounters with them;
- the compassion to maintain an imaginative empathy that reaches beyond one’s immediate surroundings and extends to those suffering in distant places (pp. 112–113).

These concepts underscore how the attainment of SDG6 emulates “the interconnectedness to all life and living,” requires courage to try “to understand people of different cultures,” and brings forth empathy for those “suffering in distant places.” That everything is interconnected permeates the three aspects of wisdom, courage, and compassion. In other words, what we do in our day-to-day lives connects even to those geographically distant. Most importantly, our personal gain in profit, pleasure, or convenience potentially produces consequences for others. Therefore, raising awareness of these interconnections becomes indispensable to progress on SDG6.

The next readings argue that equilibrium with Mother Earth cannot be achieved through an anthropocentric lens; rather, humans are intimately interconnected with nature in a dynamic relationship that equally values humans, animals, plants, rocks, and water, connecting all life and Earth (Jarrell et al., 2016; Jiménez et al., 2014; Lupinacci, 2017). What I have learned from working alongside my students on this assignment is that SDG6 relates not only to environmental justice but also to racial, economic, gender, and myriad interconnections of (in)equity. Indeed, clean water and sanitation connect to social, economic, and environmental life.

Connecting Across Genres

The two aspects of this action research assignment work together and build upon each other to highlight action and reflection. Students engage in the assignment as a form of action research: “Action research brings together action and reflection, as well as theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern” (Bradbury-Huang, 2015, p. 1). The Wikipedia edit asks students to research a topic related to SDG6 and update a Wikipedia article by adding or revising content. Through navigating the Wikipedia edit, students learn about topics related to the SDGs along with writing strategies such as avoiding biased language and paraphrasing. As part of the article editing process, students

collaborate with other Wikipedians¹ to improve the accuracy and thoroughness of content, links, references, and visuals for their selected articles. Such an assignment provides students with opportunities for learning outcomes such as evaluating sources, public writing, synthesis, and digital literacy, among others (Vetter et al., 2019).

After spending some time editing their SDG6-related Wikipedia article, students focus on a related issue for their opinion papers. Often, students use sources cited in their Wikipedia article when crafting their opinion paper. In both genres, students analyze exemplar writing samples, critique socio-environmental injustices, search for solutions, reflect on what they learn, and share their knowledge. Through their public knowledge contributions, students' work continues to advance SDG6 beyond the immediate course context and to the betterment of themselves, their communities, and the world.

This two-fold writing assignment can be adjusted to a singular assignment according to time, comfort level, and pedagogical aims, but I find that the two genres pair nicely together over a six- to eight-week time frame. Either way, during both the Wikipedia edit and the opinion paper writing process, students reflect in both small groups and larger class discussions in order to recognize how they can take steps toward access to clean water and sanitation for all.

Wikipedia Small Group Edit

The Wikipedia small group edit follows a sequence as follows:

- 1) familiarization with the genre;
- 2) selection of an article related to SDG6;
- 3) identification of academic sources to develop the article;
- 4) edits to the selected article according to the conventions identified in the WikiEdu² online training modules.

Improving social, economic, or environmental SDG6-related articles accelerates advancement toward access to water and sanitation for all by contributing accurate and reliable knowledge on a related topic.

The WikiEducation Foundation (Wiki Education Foundation, 2017) prides itself on easily accessible training modules that aim to increase global participation in the Wikipedia project. Students contribute to and improve this global knowledge resource and, in doing so, are able to work with their small groups and with the Wikipedia community towards the transformation of public awareness and knowledge regarding SDG6. I see this contribution as a form of action research. Contributions aligned with SDG6 exemplify what Whitehead (2019) calls “the global, transformative influences of action researchers, in enhancing the flow of value and understandings that carry hope for the flourishing of humanity” (p. 226).

Heuristics embedded in the process of learning how to edit a Wikipedia article also align with Adler-Kassner and Wardle (2015)'s threshold writing concepts,³ which aid in transfer to multiple interdisciplinary writing contexts. The Wikipedia edit component engages students in Adler-Kassner and Wardle's social dimension in several ways. First, it is completed in small groups. The small group design mitigates fears affiliated with what for most students is an unknown genre. Furthermore, in Wikipedia, students converse with other Wikipedia editors about how to improve their articles through the Wikipedia Talk pages. The Talk pages reinforce the message that college writers are entering into a dialogue with various communities of practitioners. In conversation with other Wikipedians, students experience the social nature of Wikipedia editing and writing in general. Importantly, recognition of writing as a social endeavor transfers to other forms of writing students encounter. In fact, the social and collaborative characteristics

of Wikipedia—the world’s largest encyclopedia—has led some to argue that Wikipedia editing itself is a social movement (Konieczny, 2009).

Students make substantive improvements to their chosen articles by adding 200–300 words of content, connecting sources to each new piece of information, adding links, and adding photos when it improves article quality. By checking sources for accuracy, updating information where needed, and providing information where gaps exist, students make an important step in attaining SDG6. While working on this assignment, my students have edited an array of articles, such as “Flint Water Crisis,” “Human Right to Water and Sanitation,” “Water Crisis in Iran,” and “Menstrual Cup” (as a potential solution to gender, economic, educational, and environmental injustices connected to a lack of access to clean water and sanitation). Because students realize that the articles they improve have the potential to be read by thousands around the globe, motivation and engagement increases; their work benefits others.

Opinion Paper

After familiarizing themselves with SDG6 by evaluating Wikipedia articles for their suitability to edit, students begin research for their opinion paper on a narrowed topic of their choice related to their small group Wikipedia article edit. In other words, students tackle two writing projects simultaneously, while teasing out differences in genre, purpose, audience, and format. Students draw upon their Wikipedia research to inform their opinion papers. Students work on their opinion papers individually, so they can home in on their unique interests and take full ownership of the project. Wikipedia writing is neutral and fact-based whereas the *Consilience* opinion paper is persuasive and solution-oriented. Paired together, these two genres build rhetorical dexterity. Lunsford (2015) explains the process this way: “When writers can identify how elements of one writing situation are similar [or different] to elements of another, their prior knowledge helps them out in analyzing the current rhetorical situation” (p. 54). Rhetorical dexterity, then, means having the flexibility to write for various audiences and purposes. In this case, as students write about SDG6 for different audiences (i.e., Wikipedia and *Consilience*), they become aware of the need to be flexible in their writing strategies. Anson (2015) explains that “such awareness is said to help writers study and reflect on what they must do in their writing to succeed by the standards of the community” (p. 78).

Like the Wikipedia edit, the *Consilience* paper’s purpose, audience, and format is determined by the journal’s publicly accessible guidelines (Consilience Editorial Board, 2020). This extends the assignment beyond the classroom boundaries toward authentic academic publication and allows me to work alongside my students as coach, breaking down teacher-student hierarchies. More importantly, their work advances progress on SDG6 in real life and real time throughout digital space. *Consilience* seeks “compelling arguments regarding controversial topics in sustainable development.” Students’ SDG6-related topics have included reviving the Gulf of Mexico’s dead zone through looking at the corn belt region’s agricultural practices; heightened vulnerability to sexual violence in India due to women’s lack of access to water and sanitation hygiene; violence and oppression against Indigenous Peoples of Bolivia through the corporatization of water; and financing complications in smallholder irrigation in Sub-Saharan Africa. In the spring of 2020, one student wrote about consequences of US involvement in Ghana’s water issues related to COVID-19. Another tackled how COVID-19 highlights the urgency of SDG6.

Students who opt to submit their opinion papers to *Consilience* for publication report that the experience provided multiple, unanticipated benefits. Clearly, students learn about the publication process itself. Additionally, reading and responding to the journal editors’ feedback provides students with other perspectives for improving their writing. For example, one student reported that they learned a new level of organizing their writing after revising their paper

according to the journal editors' feedback. Students have also reported that they gained a better handle on how to thread their paper's theme throughout the piece. As an instructor, I found that supporting students in their revisions that were suggested by someone else allowed me to foster a "guide-from-the-side" rather than a "sage-on-the-stage" pedagogy.

Adaptability

This action research project arose from my quest to promote global citizenship while navigating various writing conventions. The topic of SDGs attracted me because of the aim of "transforming our world" with the understanding that "ending poverty and other deprivations must go hand-in-hand with strategies that improve health and education, reduce inequality, and spur economic growth—all while tackling climate change" (United Nations: Department of Economic and Social Affairs. Sustainable Development., n.d., para. 1). The 2020 pandemic and increased awareness of systemic racism and other forms of violence fortifies the relevance of engaging students in these SDGs. This interconnectedness of SDG6 with multiple SDGs provides students with room to choose from a wide array of topics that can align with their interests and academic or career goals while participating in the advancement of access to water and sanitation.

Educators, as Bosio and Torres (2019) put it, have a responsibility to "promote not only skills but, most importantly, also values and actions, engaging, rather than evading, problematic questions about global disparities" (pp. 746–747). I join my students by participating in the reflections and determinations embedded in the progression of the assignment; each semester I improve at least one small aspect of my life. For example, I have eliminated disposable and plastic drink containers by bringing my coffee to my morning classes in a hand-made (by my daughter) reusable ceramic mug. Last semester, one of my students chose to write about the beef industry and its connection to global warming; his passion convinced me to return to a beef-free diet. With little prompting, students voluntarily share their own strategies for improvement.

I see the adaptability of this assignment as a benefit for courses that involve writing across the disciplines. After all, the UN's SDGs aim for social justice, so there are opportunities for students to explore a wide variety of disciplines (e.g., anthropology, sociology, biology, or business). Wikipedia editing, too, covers unlimited topics. And, while the editing can be done individually, I value group work for Wikipedia editing to lower the anxiety for some students and heighten the enjoyment that comes with learning something new with friends.

Going Forward

In the future, I plan to modify this assignment to include the wisdom of Indigenous perspectives. This will importantly disrupt a potentially Western-centric viewpoint that can fracture notions of interconnectedness with Nature and water itself. Jiménez et al. (2014) highlight the value Indigenous cultures place on water—the lifeblood of Mother Earth. Indigenous people around the world deeply connect physical and spiritual health to the health of the water and the land. Inspired by the water protectors' work at Standing Rock in North Dakota, the Acjachemen Nation is increasingly advocating and educating for protection of their land near our campus (Jarrell et al., 2016). Going forward, I hope to invite Acjachemen Nation people to share their stories and visions with my classes. Perhaps, we could learn about their struggles and offer to work with them in our local context as allies in the fight for Acjachemen water and land rights. Nikolakis and Grafton's (2014) participatory action research work collaborating with Indigenous groups in Australia to promote just water access could be included in the course readings to serve as an inspirational model. Recently, the 2019 United Nations Climate Change Conference (Stockholm International Water Institute, 2020) called to include Indigenous ontological perspectives in

both water policy and practice in order to mitigate our current climate crisis. Deeply integrating the Indigenous voice in this project will be crucial for ensuring sustainable outcomes for this assignment and for the accomplishment of SDG6.

This project could help advance social justice through any of the SDGs. An economics class, for example, could focus on reducing poverty (SDG1) or decent work and economic growth (SDG8), a biology class could focus on life on land (SDG15) or life below water (SDG14), or a literature class could focus on quality education (SDG4) or gender equality (SDG5). Each goal can connect to virtually any discipline.

When social distancing became the tool to flatten the coronavirus curve, educators around the world moved their face-to-face courses online. I had only taught this assignment face-to-face until then. Fortunately, the transition was virtually seamless. Students still posted summaries and reflections on the introductory readings in our discussion boards. The Wikipedia training modules were already online. The small group Wikipedia edits were accomplished through Zoom breakout rooms. The opinion papers were still written individually, but peer edits moved to screen shares through Zoom. I found that great progress on SDG6 can still be made in an online course. In fact, the exigence of COVID-19, including the move to online courses, has highlighted the social and environmental urgency of the assignment.

Scientists agree that the world is facing an urgent environmental crisis. Few deny the evidence of climate change, deforestation, urban sprawl, waste disposal, and water pollution. But those who want to take action can unite toward social and environmental justice as outlined in the SDGs. In this way, writing for global environmental justice accelerates the transformation of our world.

ASSIGNMENT

SDG6 Wikipedia Small Group Edit and Opinion Paper

*streams push through
layers of dirt
as veins embrace waters and soil
growing the life blood of Our Mother
the Earth*

—K. Dawn Martin, Six Nations of the Grand River

Overview

The United Nations' 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) were constructed to address global crises including poverty, inequality, climate, environmental degradation, and peace and justice. SDG6 sees that too many people still lack access to safe water supplies and sanitation facilities. Through your contribution of knowledge to two public online audiences, you will accelerate progress on securing access to water and sanitation for all.

In small groups, you will perform research on a topic of your choice related to the UN SDG #6 and edit a Wikipedia article, which you will complete in designated steps over the remainder of the semester. You will also submit an opinion paper on a topic related to your small group Wikipedia edit.

Purpose

This project provides you an opportunity to grow as a global citizen through increasing access to clean water and sanitation and developing your effectiveness as a writer. It is about communicating, convincing, and sharing with others about the importance of SDG6 by contributing to two online venues.

Connection to Course Learning Objectives

- Contribute scholarship to urgent socio-environmental issues related to water and sanitation that affect citizens of the world.
- Analyze texts in a variety of genres and disciplines, identifying main ideas and details, drawing inferences and conclusions, and differentiating between neutral and persuasive rhetorical moves.
- Revise content, organization, and language according to two different sets of purposes, audiences, and formats through multiple drafts.
- Evaluate and provide feedback among peers.
- Expand competence in and understanding of digital literacy.

Wikipedia Group Edit

In small groups, you will work collaboratively to create article edits according to Wikipedia training modules and through in-class practice. With teamwork, maximize everyone's strengths, compensate for each other's weaknesses, and give more than you get. Also, conquer and divide as you proceed through the project.

Purpose and Audience

The purpose of this project is to expand your own awareness of this critical global issue, inform your classmates about your topic, and provide access to your research through the global Wikipedia platform. Through such scholarship and public contribution, this project aims to support and make headway on this UN goal of sustainable development in water and sanitation.

Engaging in Wikipedia provides an opportunity to write for a global audience of anyone who has access to the Internet. Wikipedia provides free content “anyone can use, edit, and distribute” (“Wikipedia: Five Pillars”) in an encyclopedic format.

Task

1. Choose an article that meets the following criteria:
 - Article's quality rating “important” and C-class to ensure that it is in need of further development
 - Article is of interest to you (either academically as a topic related to your major, or more personally)
 - Article is on a topic notable enough that relevant published research is available (i.e., find at least 5 reputable sources [journal articles, UN documents, academic books, etc] to draw from).
2. Evaluate the article to determine how it could be improved and what content could be added.
3. Submit a short (150-300 words) proposal in which you do the following:
 - Identify specific content that could be added to your article
 - Identify other improvements and/or revisions that could be made to the article
 - Locate and make a list of at least 5 secondary sources you plan to use in the development of your article in a group sandbox. You should make a list of

these sources with as much citation information as you can find (so you'll be ready to add them to your article)

4. Edit approved article collaboratively according to Wikipedia conventions.
 - Style: Neutral, third person, objective, easy-to-understand
 - Well-sourced: Uses secondary sources/references to back up knowledge claims
 - Structure: Consistent with Wikipedia article conventions (lead, section headings, etc.)
 - Editorial contributions should make substantive improvements to the article: between 200-300 words, citations for each concept, copyedits, links, organizational improvements, and photos if appropriate.
5. Groups will present their article edits to the class (visuals are encouraged).
 - talk about conversations within the Wikipedia community
 - share your group process
 - showcase your contributions

Wikipedia Sample Articles to Edit

- SDG6
- Rainwater Harvesting
- Water Issues in Developing Countries
- Menstrual Hygiene Management
- Water Scarcity in Africa
- Pollution of the Ganges
- Yamuna (River in India)
- Water Supply
- Sustainable Sanitation
- Water Quality
- Water Supply and Sanitation in Costa Rica
- Water Treatment
- World Toilet Day
- Human Right to Water and Sanitation
- Reuse of Excreta
- Hygiene
- Waterborne Diseases
- Water Privatization
- Swachh Bharat Mission
- Recycling by Product
- Greywater
- Compost
- Water Supply and Sanitation in Cuba

Consilience Opinion Paper

Beginning with the sources you used in your Wikipedia edit, craft an academic opinion paper on a specific topic related to SDG6, bringing your own critical thinking to this issue. Along the way:

1. Review the resources from your Wikipedia edit article
2. Formulate a problem
3. Determine additional and different resources for your opinion piece
4. Complete a literature review matrix
5. Develop a thesis

6. Brainstorm with classmates, Writing Center, and me
7. Review *Consilience Journal* to note stylistic conventions
8. Draft/submit paper targeting the *Consilience* Opinion section audience
9. Complete peer review
10. Revise, edit, and submit to Dropbox

Audience

Consilience: The Journal of Sustainable Development is dedicated to promoting interdisciplinary dialogue on sustainable development. It aims to bring students, researchers, professors, and practitioners from a variety of disciplines and geographical regions in direct conversation with each other through an online, open access, academically rigorous medium. You will write an Opinion piece (see Brightspace for examples) designed to offer a compelling argument regarding a controversial topic in sustainable development. You may wish to include photographs and figures to illustrate your claims. Although submitting your paper to the journal is not a course requirement, you are encouraged to do so. Whether you choose to submit or not, treat the assignment as if you plan on submitting your paper for publication.

Task

The researched opinion paper is 2700-4000 words, APA-style. Dive deep into a narrow topic within your group's Wikipedia article topic. To inform your paper, analyze published opinion papers in *Consilience: The Journal of Sustainable Development*. The **introduction** should capture your readers' interest in the problem or question you address in the paper, explaining why it is a problem and its importance. The **body** consists of a persuasive answer to the question you pose in the introduction. Include relevant analysis of the literature, argumentation, and evidence through intertextual synthesis. Include a **conclusion** that may call for further research.

Submit: Draft two weeks prior to Final; Final due the last day of class.

Sample Opinion Statements and Topics

- XXX is/is not a way to ensure the availability of water for the people of XYZ
- XXX is/is not a way to ensure availability of sanitation for the people of XYZ
- XYZ can reduce hazardous chemicals/substances in XXX
- XYZ is a way to reduce water pollution of XYZ water body
- XYZ can increase recycling and reuse of XXX product/material
- XYZ can increase cooperation at transboundary waterways
- XYZ can help protect/restore mountain, forest, wetland, river and lake water-related ecosystems
- Select a country and discuss the complexities of women and water supply. Argue for the causes of the issue OR the solution to the problem
- Causes and solutions to environmental racism
- Rainwater Harvesting is/is not a viable solution to water access in XYZ.
- Children and water collection: issues (causes & solutions) in XYZ
- Describe the problem of water involved in the life cycle (production through decomposition) of a product (e.g., silk vs. cotton vs. polyester clothing) or a food (e.g., beef, corn, soy, wheat, etc.) and provide solutions.
- Compare the risks and benefits to reuse of excreta in agricultural fertilization
- Discuss causes/solutions to waterborne disease(s).
- Some cultures value/embrace open defecation. Argue for or against its global implementation.

- Issues of open defecation in XYZ
- Describe the problem of pollution of the XYZ River. Determine what you believe are the primary causes of the problem, create an argument, and provide evidence to support.
- Describe the problem of pollution of the XYZ River and argue for a specific solution to the problem.
- Discuss how to increase global cooperation for issues such as desalination, water efficiency, wastewater treatment, recycling, and reuse technologies
- Expose systemic inequities of access to water and sanitation in a specific location or as a global issue.
- Argue how local communities can engage in water and sanitation access

Notes

¹Wikipedians are voluntary editors of Wikipedia.

²WikiEdu's mission statement reads: "Wiki Education engages students and academics to improve Wikipedia, enrich student learning, and build a more informed public."

³Adler-Kassner and Wardle gathered 29 scholars in the field of composition, rhetoric, and writing studies to name 37 concepts that explain the process of writing and writing pedagogy. Their edited volume, *Naming What We Know*, summarizes many key ideas from fifty years of writing research.

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.v5i1.76>.

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Embedding Ethnocultural Empathy in a Community-Based Health Intervention Writing Assignment

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Abstract

This article describes an undergraduate health sciences course where students propose a community-level intervention that addresses a local health disparity. Students use community planning principles and health equity concepts as a final project in their 8-week online community-engaged course. The student-proposed project engages a community in health education or promotion-program planning and allows for faculty assessment of pedagogical decisions. A curricular commitment to health equity enhances the capacity and competency of learners to address the structural inequities that fuel pervasive health disparities among socially disadvantaged populations. Ethnocultural empathy or racial/ethnic perspective taking is used as a measurable competency. The final paper requires students to describe how the perspectives of Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) have shaped their proposed community intervention. They are also asked to offer recommendations on how to best mitigate the racial bias that may show up in community-based interventions.

Key Ideas Characterizing the Assignment

In my 8-week online community-engaged course, I place an emphasis on my students learning about achieving health equity through disease prevention and health promotion. The goal is for students to understand the varied social conditions that influence health in order to advance community, population, and public health in the United States. In doing so, they identify ways to prevent unfair and avoidable health differences across U.S. subpopulations of racial/ethnic minorities, or Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC). The historically pervasive nature of racialized health disparities can be mitigated by practicing empathy towards racial and ethnic minorities disproportionately affected by poor health outcomes. The knowledge students gain and the skills they practice in this course allow them to better relate to, and care for, the complex and shifting community-level needs of racially diverse patient populations.

U.S. census data indicates that where you live determines *how long* you live. This means it is not enough to focus health education efforts on what people eat or whether they are physically active. Community-based health promotion programs must consider if communities have access to fresh produce and safe green spaces to walk, run, bike, and play. These social determinants of health are at the core of preventing disease. Research shows that people are more likely to be physically, mentally, emotionally, and socially well when they live in communities designed to keep them healthy. In addition to understanding key public health concepts, students uncover why it is important to involve the target population in the design and implementation of community-based health interventions. Students also gather evidence for how best to engage a community of interest in addressing a health disparity.

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We start by exploring the [Healthy People Framework](#), guidelines created by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services that articulate the nation’s goals for achieving health equity. The factors we discuss—housing, jobs, income, food, transportation, education, neighborhood, social connections, and healthcare—are social structures that cut across multiple sectors. For these reasons, I invite my students to examine why promoting health equity requires an “all hands on deck” approach. Problem-solving solutions to ongoing health disparities call for collaboration, creativity, and empathy. This call is taken up in a paper assignment.

In an 8-page paper, students propose a community-level health intervention. Students select a community and propose a plan using the U.S. Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion (n.d.)’s Mobilize-Assess-Plan-Implement-Track (MAP-IT) model. The MAP-IT model is a part of the Healthy People Framework that organizes the learning objectives for the course. Not only must their papers include a proposed community-level intervention to address one local health disparity among a socially disadvantaged population—as outlined in the MAP-IT model—but it must also incorporate the input of a local community-based organization on their proposed intervention. Additionally, their papers include a reflection on the structural inequities faced by BIPOC in their selected community. Students respond to all required discussion board questions as well as instructor and peer feedback throughout the course.

Institutional, Disciplinary, and Course Context

I teach undergraduates in the School of Medicine and Health Sciences (SMHS) at The George Washington University in Washington, DC. As a subject matter expert, I lead the health equity curriculum efforts for the undergraduate health sciences programs. In fact, I am designing our health equity curriculum thread across a suite of seven undergraduate health sciences courses. A curricular commitment to health equity enhances the capacity and competency of learners. Students learn to confront the structural inequities that fuel health disparities among socially disadvantaged populations.

Promoting empathy addresses racial/ethnic health disparities and works to achieve health equity. In the literature, empathy is a competency achieved and measured in many ways; one of the competencies I am most interested in teaching and assessing is Wang et al.’s (2003) construct of ethnocultural empathy. Ethnocultural empathy is the “ability to perceive the world as the other person does; that is, racial or ethnic perspective taking” (p. 222). Ethnocultural empathy can be measured with a scale of teachable capabilities and individual traits. I designed course activities and assessments for students to practice ethnocultural empathy.

Course Overview

I revised “HSCI 2110: Disease Prevention and Health Promotion” with an emphasis on health equity. HSCI 2110 is the foundational course in our health equity curriculum core, and empathy is a crucial competency. This course provides the foundation for the remaining undergraduate health science courses, and it integrates health equity objectives, content, and outcomes across undergraduate courses. I teach and serve as the course director for HSCI 2110, an online three-credit course offered every fall semester. All undergraduate health science students enrolled in the Clinical Health Sciences and Clinical Regulatory Affairs B.S. programs must complete HSCI 2110 to graduate. In this asynchronous online course, all students are adult learners, and many are military personnel with a health sciences major. This accelerated course requires 360 hours of contact time in the span of eight weeks.

HSCI 2110 is also a community-engaged course, where students reflect on their civic identities as contributing members of their local (and global) communities. The student-proposed

project engages in community health education or health promotion-program planning and allows me to assess what pedagogical decisions matter for teaching and assessing ethnocultural empathy.

Precedents and Influences for Creating the Assignment

Health professions education reform is long overdue. The Lancet Independent Global Commission on Education of Health Professionals for the 21st Century (Frenk et al., 2010) identifies how pervasive health disparities necessitate curriculum reform within existing postsecondary education across the fields of allied health, public health, nursing, and medicine. The Commission's report also provides a critique of prevailing learning traditions that focus on knowledge and skill transfer at the expense of building and applying appropriate measurable competencies. For instance, the authors critique the narrow technical focus of curriculum content without broader contextual understanding, the mismatch of existing competencies to patient and population needs, and missed opportunities to build leadership capacity in students. Attention to leadership capacity and other factors can improve health systems. The report commentary serves as a call to act, admonishing educators to move the needle from learning outcomes that are informative to those that are transformative. Only with transformative learning can health professionals apply their competency-based training to address the dynamic needs of an increasingly diverse patient population amidst a shifting and complex health system.

On the heels of the Commission's recommendations, a group of U.S. university researchers designed a qualitative research study to assess the leadership competencies of 32 medical students enrolled in mentored co-curricular activities within their *Global Health and Disparities Path of Excellence* (Mullan et al., 2014). The capstone project, mentorship program, and connections to professional networks not only aligned with students' career interests, but also sought to develop competencies aimed at eliminating disparities in medically underserved settings. While cultural competency remains ill-operationalized within the study, the researchers did document the use of student reflection on a leadership competency necessary to make healthcare decisions. More pointedly, the study offers several insights for my own scholarship on using reflection to assess empathy as a competency for undergraduate students enrolled in a health equity-based course. Therefore, I designed this reflection-based assignment as a way for students to practice ethnocultural empathy.

Experiences Teaching the Assignment

I designed the final paper assignment so that students are adequately prepared and supported in their comprehension and application of key health equity-based concepts. The health equity-based content of this course teaches students about historical and structural barriers, and determinants of health that unfairly and adversely affect BIPOC. Course content includes data reports, patient narratives, and research statistics that often highlight the disparate rates of morbidity and mortality among BIPOC. Students receive feedback on their ideas and can edit and adjust their proposal papers accordingly.

Ongoing Support for Submission of Final Paper

By the time they get to week 3, students post discussion board responses on community-engaged prompts such as, "In what ways can you assess the community?" In response, students initially

reference local and state data on a specific health disparity. But, with additional questions in the same discussion board, students are encouraged to identify existing resources in the community. I invite my students to consider community assets including the interests, skills, and strengths of the community. Students then name everything from local gatekeepers and civic associations to recreation centers and parks as community resources. This discussion board thread primes students to explore what is meant by asset-based, participatory, and sustainable community partnerships.

When it comes to being participatory, I invite students to consider the role of the community in implementing the intervention (e.g., grassroots versus top-down). To this end, students must identify one non-profit hospital/clinic or community-based organization that can speak to the assets and needs of their community. In addition, students explore how the community gatekeepers can sustain the intervention over time.

I discuss how the language students use is important for framing their communities of interest, identifying unfair health disparities, and proposing an intervention that engages the community for the long haul. As an example, I point out how the term “at-risk” is both stigmatizing and pathologizing. We also discuss how disparities exist in populations but not patients to justify why they are invited to select a community. An essential part of their final project includes community partnerships and planning, and an equity lens is a critical component of their proposed intervention. This is why the discussion board assignments support students’ understanding of community gatekeepers, assessing community needs, and employing community engagement strategies. By employing community engagement strategies, students create a vested interest from a range of stakeholders. This makes addressing one selected health outcome sustainable.

By week 4, students translate their ideas into a short paper about how the community will engage in the proposed project. Students prepare a two-three page draft of their final paper organized around each of the five sections of the MAP-IT (Mobilize-Assess-Plan-Implement-Track) model. I instruct the students to respond to the questions under each of the sub-sections from the U.S. Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion’s (n.d.) website to help them think of what information needs to go in each section (see the assignment below).

First, they introduce their proposed initiative and the community it engages—citing data from the Healthy People Framework. In this “Mobilize” step, they also consider the principles of health education and health promotion from the course textbook and consider how they intend to involve the community. At this point in the course, the students receive substantial feedback from me on how they demonstrate their understanding of health disparities, social determinants of health, community assessment and engagement, as well as the application of the MAP-IT model to aid in their planning.

In this draft, students must include the name and target population of their community partner from the previous week’s discussion board. The paper is staged in this way so that when students submit their final paper, they can contact their organization and describe what they see as the needs and assets of their community. In their final paper, they explain how their proposals are useful in the work of the community-based organization. This draft serves as the basis of their final project.

Teaching the proposal in stages allows students’ papers to improve over the course of the semester. For instance, one student wrote about their interest in addressing the growing obesity epidemic in their local community in their week 3 discussion board post. This student translated their understanding of the social determinants of health into their proposed initiative by focusing on the absence of sidewalks as a structural barrier for residents to be physically active. Between weeks 4 and 7, this student was required to share their proposed ideas with

identified gatekeepers in their targeted community. After talking with two community leaders, the student agreed that building new sidewalks would be ideal, but time and cost intensive. For immediate results, the student redesigned their initiative using the same tactics as a local running club. The student proposed that twenty well-traveled areas of the city be designated as “activity zones” with signage and minor activity equipment. This would include, as an example, posting signs at the entrance of a local grocery store demonstrating how people could earn 600 steps towards their daily 10,000 step goal if they walked from the store entrance to their car located in the back of the parking lot. The student proposed that local college students in the kinesiology department would take the lead in determining the site-specific measurements. Seeking the input of actual community leaders on the feasibility, design, and/or acceptance of the student proposal makes the theoretical concepts come alive.

With the MAP-IT model, I can ensure that students share power and make decisions with the community. As students complete the “Assess” step in this process, they reflect what Shah (2020) describes as a critical community-based epistemology, because they value community expertise and perceive community members as assets to health promotion. In this way, students seek out community investment in their health interventions that may be sustained beyond a classroom assignment.

By week 7, students are sharing and peer-reviewing the executive summaries of their projects on a discussion board. In their final papers, students are asked in what ways they considered or addressed the input of their peers. Returning to the “activity zones” example, this student was able to expand their initiative with peer input to add a social media component and a capacity to track steps in real time. By the end of the semester, this student’s project expanded to include a user-friendly app modeled after the widely used www.meetup.com algorithm so that local residents could input their steps from one zone and neighborhood to the next. The student also updated their proposal to include how this local initiative would rely on community programs alongside social media to promote and publicize its efforts and outcomes. They expressed gratitude to their peers on the discussion board for sharing ideas that they previously had not considered, while recognizing that they still had full autonomy to design their proposed project in ways that made sense to their stated aims and community values.

Successful Outcomes

A total of 78 students have completed this assignment across four classes. Each time, I integrate an IRB-approved 5-point Likert scale pre/posttest instrument of six items to assess self-reported ethnocultural empathy. All enrolled students received an email with a Qualtrics link to the assessment. During the last week of class, I offer the students one extra credit point if they complete the online retrospective posttest. A total of 60 students across four sections of this course in the Fall of 2018 and Fall of 2019 completed it. To evaluate my ability to teach and assess self-reported accounts of empathy, I assessed the results of the pre- and post-tests using Wang et al.’s (2003) *Scale of Ethnocultural Empathy*. When assessing students’ recognition of systemic oppression, in two sections, improvement was significant.

By the end of the course, 86% of students reported feeling comfortable in discussing controversial topics in text online. The same amount believed that it is possible to learn about sensitive topics by discussing them in text online. These findings are important for a course that relies exclusively on an online format to hold value-laden discussions. On average, 80% of students enter the course believing that being racially discriminated against impacts one’s health, but 90% leave the course with this understanding. Additionally, 83% of students across all four sections enter the course believing that health is more than healthcare, but 98% leave the

course with an understanding of community factors in health equity. These health equity-based attitudes parallel the students' self-reported increase in understanding the health implications of racial bias and discrimination.

Students' Experiences Completing the Assignment

Assessing community needs is no easy feat. I assume that a good number of students are accustomed to researching statistics and then interpreting community needs. When asked to reflect on what it is like thinking of and engaging the community when designing an intervention, the vast majority of students mention how it runs counter to how they are accustomed to thinking about health promotion activities. To extend this point, one student explains that it “was an exercise in keeping an open mind and not being too married to an idea before doing much research because chances are... if you talk with people who have done that work before you can perhaps save some time by not repeating mistakes.” Students came to value the expertise and lived experience of residents and community anchors alongside data. This is especially important for working with socially disadvantaged populations such as BIPOC. Still, not everyone comes to this realization easily.

Why is everything about race? This is the question I can count on being asked in every HSCI 2110 course. As the course unfolds with lectures that differentiate between health differences and health disparities and rely on scores of data and practitioners' perspectives, students begin to recognize how improving the health of the least socially advantaged groups improves the health of *all*. One student writes, “I think it is extremely important for healthcare professionals to be aware of their racial biases.” Another shares that they “realize the disadvantage that some people have just because of the color of their skin.” The reflective writing prompts in the final paper follow discussions of science and medicine justifying discriminatory, substandard, and unethical medical practices for racial minority groups. Students also share the belief that “for us to achieve health equity for vulnerable populations, we must first recognize biases and remove them as a barrier.” Across student writing, it is clear that they recognize how being racially discriminated against affects health.

To provide evidence for how achieving healthy equity benefits everyone, I review housing and job laws and explore what access to quality schools and food looks like. Yet, there remain some students who are not sold on the idea that social policy is health policy. In fact, some students describe healthcare as a privilege rather than a right. Across their reflective writing, some students subscribe to the idea that people choose to be poor, referencing their own privileged lives as an exemplar for BIPOC to follow. These types of comments co-exist with their acknowledgement of how racial bias, “affect[s] groups of people who have typically experienced obstacles to their healthcare based on their race,” as one student put it. There exists a tendency to compartmentalize these ideas rather than review and critique them as a historical and inter-related system of oppression. Students can recognize that racialized oppression exists, but being aware of oppression does not automatically translate into expressing empathy. This explains the need for perspective taking as another measurable subscale for assessing ethnocultural empathy.

A memorable paper included a fictional elderly Black patient who often relied on the emergency room for services that are offered by primary care providers. In their writing, the student does not denigrate this patient for not establishing a medical home. Instead, they recognized the varied barriers to accessing quality healthcare services. In talking with local faith leaders, this student came up with an idea to engage a group of well-respected off-duty and retired EMS personnel to provide home healthcare to elderly patients who have a hard time getting to and from scheduled appointments. In papers like this one, students readily identify key

community gatekeepers and even propose carefully designed ideas to address rapport and trust in patient-provider relationships.

Yet, assessing outcomes is challenging and contradictory. The majority of students erroneously conflate structural health outcomes such as increasing access to healthcare or reducing infant mortality rates with what they can feasibly do in a small individual-level intervention (e.g., increasing steps or self-efficacy). This is the type of feedback I provide to students in their drafts that they often do not address in their final paper.

Further Development

I designed online course activities for adult learners to think about racial oppression as a budding and/or current practitioner. The final paper requires them to describe how the perspectives of BIPOC who face injustice have shaped their proposed community intervention. They are also asked to offer recommendations on how best to mitigate the racial bias that may show up in community-based interventions. In my observation, opportunities to fully consider racially motivated oppression is often thwarted by socially ingrained notions of personal responsibility. For instance, when asked to share their thoughts on the historical disadvantages to achieving health equity for BIPOC, many students credit the course discussions for expanding their understanding of how race-based medicine, bias, stigma, and other structural inequities shape disparate health outcomes for racial and ethnic minorities. However, the meritocracy narrative is pervasive, as students resort to solutions that place the onus on individuals to just “take charge of their health,” despite the structural threats to care and human dignity they identify.

Further research is necessary to determine how learner identity shapes the construction and meaningfulness of this assignment. For instance, how students own racial and ethnic identity informs their capacity for ethnocultural empathy is largely unknown. Some students disclose their racial identities in their reflections, while others did not. On the one hand, one could argue that empathizing with BIPOC is a skill only useful for students who do not identify as members of any given racial/ethnic social group. Yet, there is no evidence (within the literature or this course) that this is the case. I could draw from the model minority (Wong & Halgin, 2006) or involuntary minority (Gibson, 1997) literature to defend why some BIPOC may not necessarily relate to the plight of other BIPOC in their attempt to achieve health equity. In a future version of this assignment, I will include a prompt that explicitly asks about students’ social identities and in what ways they believe it affects their ability to take on the perspectives of BIPOC. This prompt is an important addition—and why I have not suggested that one’s racial identity predicts their ability to empathize with BIPOC. This would be an erroneous assumption given that one’s lived experience is situated at the intersections of varied other identities that often create nuanced and unique social realities. Racialized experiences cannot be essentialized as the sole factor for empathy.

Just as student learners need to reflect on their own identities as they cultivate empathy, instructors are also learners who need to reckon with their own identities. In fact, there is a vast literature on the impact of teacher identity on learning outcomes (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011; Hockings et al., 2009). Case in point: instructor identities show up in which text examples they select as well as their interpretations of student reflections. The next version of this assignment will include some pre-work for myself and adjuncts who teach sections of this course to remain reflective and transparent about our positionalities. To supplement my written biography, I will add a video introduction talking about my lived experiences and how my upbringing and social identities have shaped how I see inequities, disadvantages, and the role of health professionals.

Finally, I cannot make generalizations based on these data due to the small sample size. At

the end of the course, students reflect on their previous positions and compare this stance to their current views. Future studies with paired pre- and posttests and assessment questions on the use of reflection will further improve the robustness of evaluation findings. Still, I recognize that there is only so much that can be realistically expected from students in an accelerated online course. Some studies on empathy among medical trainees indicate a decline in empathy that can include self-reported distress from training curriculum (Aparicio et al., 2019; Hojat et al., 2020; Neumann et al., 2011). Between this potential empathy decline and self-recall bias, I cannot rely on this one assignment to translate into more compassionate or patient-centered care. This explains why the course, not merely the assignment, is designed to build capacity for ethnocultural empathy—and why other courses within our undergraduate health equity thread must build on this foundation.

ASSIGNMENT

In the final paper, you will also develop a plan to address a community health issue using the MAP-IT format that is scoped for your local community (keep the scale small to keep it manageable). Incorporate the feedback you received from your instructor on your MAP-IT paper and the comments from your classmates via the discussion board. Below are elements that must be included in your final paper (along with page minimums):

Mobilize and Assess

- Define your community- geographically, racially, economically, (including other demographics, as interested) (.5 pg)
- Cite data on the [Leading Health Indicators](#) of choice for that community, including its impact (.5 pg)
- Discuss your community needs assessment. You were asked to establish communication with one community based organization of your choice by email and/or phone. What needs and assets did you identify? What did the CBO share on how they can (or do) use that information? How did you use this assessment data to inform the design of your proposed intervention? (2 pgs)

Plan and Implement

- Describe the health education or promotion plan. (1 pg)
- How is your project designed with health equity in mind? (.5 pg)
- How will you implement the program? What resources will you use? (1 pg)
- Describe how the perspectives of racial/ethnic minorities who face injustices has shaped your proposed community intervention. Additionally, describe your thoughts on being asked to reflect on your ability to consider racial/ethnic perspectives that differ from your own. (.5 pg)

Track

- How will you measure your success? (1 pg)
- How can racial biases show up in a community-based intervention and what plans do you have in place for health professional to address them using your intervention? (.5 pg)

NOTE: Make sure to reference course materials and at least five (5) peer reviewed journal articles. Your final paper is worth 20 points and is due by 11:59pm EST on week 8.

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.v5i1.67>.

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