

## **Effective Instructional Practice:**

### **Engaging in Activism**

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Frey and Palmer (2014) emphasized that activism pedagogy is “not a call to eliminate tradition, basic skills and practical knowledge in favor of theoretically radical curriculum” (p. 25) but instead complements, amplifies, and extends the possibilities for student learning. Activism pedagogy arguably differentiates itself from other radical or critical communication pedagogies in the ways that it works to consistently move to justice-centered action. In the field of communication studies, conversations about activism-centered engagement have been forwarded and amplified by the development of Communication Activism Pedagogy (CAP) which, in the words of Frey and Palmer (2017),:

(a) provides students with experiential opportunities to intervene and (b) seeks to affect, in both the short and long term, social justice problems (e.g., stopping people on death row from being executed and preventing human trafficking) that have an exigency demanding that something be done. (p. 381)

In short, activism pedagogy moves justice-focused critical and radical theory toward applied-learning practices that have civic impact.

Engaging in activism has three benefits for students. First, the emphasis on experiential learning in activist pedagogies ultimately inspires real-world effects on, and connections in, the communities where students live, work, and can have ongoing influence (Cox & Geiger, 2014; Cuny, Thompson, & Naidu, 2014; Kennerly, 2014; Squires & Creager, 2014). Second, students who engage in activism expand their democratic and civic-mindedness by becoming ethical community members who practice communication skill sets that can support the transformation of democratic

process in community (Javanovic, 2014; Murray & Fixmer-Oraiz, 2014). Third, students are invited to recognize critical overlaps between the “real world” and academic theory--such as feminist and intersectional theory, prison abolitionist theory, and environmental theory--and are ultimately able to build an applied understanding of critical theory, while expanding the community effects of justice-driven theory (Carey, 2014; Cox & Pezzullo, 2015; Enck, 2014; Hartnett, Wood, & McCann, 2011).

The primary barriers to achieving activism in communication classrooms are (a) the institutional, professional, and social logics and limitations of late capitalism that inform classroom pedagogy, particularly as it is driven by discourses of professionalization and student-as-consumer and not civic virtue or social justice; (b) the belief that teaching can and should be neutral or apolitical; and (c) a lack of established collaboration toward action between community-based organizers and university-based scholars (Frey & Palmer, 2014; Javanovic, 2014; McLaren, 2014).

### **Three Tips for Engaging in Activism in the Classroom**

1. In activist-centered courses, student success depends on educator engagement. Strong activist-informed pedagogy is produced by scholar-activists who participate in the movement in ways that make them fluent in the terms and trials of activist efforts they teach alongside (see Cox & Pezzullo, 2015, Enck, 2014; Hartnett et al., 2011). Educators must first practice the critical listening skills they hope to inspire in their students, attuning themselves to and investing in the social justice causes in ways that allow them to understand how their students could be useful--and potentially harmful--to a movement. In addition to participating in local community activism, instructors can acquire resources and build strong classroom activism frameworks by

participating in ongoing pedagogical and political conversations in the field of communication.

2. Instructors must cultivate activist learning that invites students to work *with* other activists or communities deeply affected by the injustice that the course plans to address. Educators should design projects identified as useful by organizing communities within time parameters that are cognizant of the community organizers' ongoing efforts (Badger, 2017; Russell & Congdon, 2017). This design may require facilitators to think outside of university service learning paradigms, the traditional communication syllabus, or, in some instances, the semester. Collaborative work toward activist-centered course design begins long before the first day of class through actions such as inviting community organizers to determine critical needs and to be a part of developing course plans. Doing this shapes instructors' ability to ethically facilitate experiential learning that is attentive to the history and existing activist networks within which students might participate.

3. Instructors must consider the skill sets and logic frameworks students need to possess in order to exert a positive impact and to feel empowered in the activist organization or cause. Instructors must prepare students and provide them with skill sets so they can contribute meaningfully within movements. Various scholars (Badger, 2017; Del Gandio, 2017; Fassett & Warren, 2007; Javanovic, 2014) recommend that civic-minded educators develop critical, inclusive, ethical, dialogic learning to precede or occur alongside direct activism. This increases the probability that student participation and prejudice will not become a burden or set-back to community activism or broader movement efforts. It is critical that instructors realistically establish course goals to

ensure that students have the requisite time to build skills and investment before participating in activism.

### **Assessing Activism in the Classroom**

Frey and Palmer (2014) noted that assessment to measure socially just activism has been difficult, but they advocate for integrating activist pedagogy research into pedagogical practices, seeking the views of affected community members and structuring research into course assignments. Some ways of effectively assessing activism include student self-assessment and critical reflection essays that have the dual function of supporting qualitative assessment and inviting student self-awareness and learning. Similarly, gathering community feedback and reflection is critical to assessment of the course and course projects. It also is often productive to invite community partners to be involved in creating student assessment tools for future semesters. Doing so can help instructors better understand community work and goals as they pursue activist work with community members in the future.

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