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Write-a-thons and Community Panels: Encouraging Students to "Go Public" with Their Writing
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Overview

First-year writing classes (can) provide a fertile ground for student exploration of meaningful topics that impact them and their broader communities both within and beyond the Ivory Tower. Research-based writing courses, in particular, can open up spaces for students to dive deep into areas that are important to them on an individual or community-wide level. It is all too easy, however, for students or instructors to lose sight of the public audiences beyond academic readerships who both inform and are impacted by the research students conduct. The Write-a-thon and Community Panel activity provides one option for connecting students to community audiences and the potentials of writing publicly for social change.

This activity provides first-year students with the opportunity to think through their research topics and how to "go public" with them (Holmes; Mortensen).

Time Commitment

1-2 class sessions

Materials

A list of social media accounts, advocacy campaigns, and volunteer opportunities in your community (or remote around the world) should be curated before presenting the activity to students. If doing the community panel, contact potential guests in advance as well.

Activity Process

Before the first class session:

- First, students are assigned to read Holmes' "Public Writing for Social Change," from *Writing Spaces* volume 4.

For the write-a-thon:

- After reading Holmes, the write-a-thon consists of various bite-sized writing activities to encourage students to "go public" (Holmes; Mortensen) with their writing. These are grouped into three themes: social media, advocacy, and volunteering, though instructors can tailor these themes based on their course content, student interests, and connections to public writing opportunities. Many students are already versed in multiple social media platforms and use them regularly in their lives, so modelling how students can use these platforms for social change can help them with the goal of "going public." In the context of a writing classroom, advocacy prompts help show students the power of their rhetorical learning and growth to make an impact beyond the classroom. Finally, volunteering opportunities offer a more embodied way of putting content knowledge – and often writing skill – into practice in ways that work in service to students' broader geographic and affinity-based communities. For example, I teach a first-year writing class on forced migration and transnationalism in the 21st century, so our work in this activity focuses on ways to use writing to support refugees and immigrants. I curate activities for students based on my own understandings, experiences, and knowledge in this subject area, with opportunities for students to create their own activities with a "choose your own adventure" option. Students are given most or all of the class period (depending on how long each class session is; about 40-60 minutes) to complete whichever activities they

want. If you have a class playlist, you could play it during this time while students are working. Some examples of activities for each theme include:

- o Social Media: Students can watch a podcast created by refugee youth (Youth UnMuted, "Now You Hear Us Podcast"); follow and add social media accounts on a crowd-sourced list of different social media accounts on the issue of forced migration; read an issue of a digital magazine created by refugees (Youth Ritsona; Youth UnMuted, "About the Magazine"); or create their own social media activity (see "Choose Your Own Adventure" below).

- o Advocacy: Within our class theme, students have the option to write a welcome note to new refugees coming to the U.S.; to call or email their Senators and Representatives to advocate for higher refugee admission caps, for U.S.-based students; to sign petitions to government officials; and to inform themselves on current issues and take action by exploring relevant organizations' carrds (Middle East Matters) linktrees (Razom for Ukraine), and GoogleDocs (Black Alliance for Just Immigration). Students can also "choose their own adventure" (see below).

- o Volunteering: In this section, I share volunteer opportunities that I am aware of, including global and national remote opportunities, and hybrid opportunities in our city and at our university, to encourage students to get involved in the issues they are researching outside of the classroom. They also can create their own volunteering activity and share

it with the class (see "Choose Your Own Adventure")

o Choose Your Own Adventure: In each of the above sections, students are provided the opportunity to make their own activity and share it on a collaborative GoogleDoc, so that the instructor and other students can learn from or replicate this activity. This also provides space for students to exercise their agency in shifting away from the prescribed, or "curated" activities, and into making their own custom, self-directed activity.

▪ After completing their chosen activities, at the end of class, students complete a write-a-thon checkout Google Form, with their name (for credit) and an explanation of what they did during the write-a-thon and how they will continue to "go public" with what they are learning and researching in class. This form helps with accountability and also gestures towards writing transfer (Taczak) and metacognitive reflection on the importance of writing for social change.

For the community panel:

▪ For homework after the first class session (or as part of the class for a longer 2.5 or 3-hour course), students are asked to prepare for the community panel, which can take place synchronously in the next class, or asynchronously with recordings as homework. In the weeks leading up to this module, I reach out to community members involved in some of the volunteer, social media, and advocacy activities curated. These community members have included NGO leaders, poets, and storytelling facilitators, and are folks with whom I have previous relationships, but if you don't have these connections, you could also seek out TedTalks and other interactive media from public writers you admire that

talk about their process writing for social change. I compile brief introductions for each guest with a photo, which I typically can find from their organization website before running past them for approval. After "meeting" the guests in advance, students are asked to submit 1-2 questions for the panel (or a specific panelist) through a GoogleForm. These questions are compiled, and organized thematically, then shared with the panel in advance. If you were using TedTalks rather than panelists you could have students submit people they want to learn from, rather than questions for panelists.

- The next section, the community panel itself, has two options: synchronous (in-person, remote, or hybrid) and asynchronous (recorded; see Learning Accommodations section for more information bout these options). Depending on the amount of time you have (I usually spend about 60-90 minutes for the panel) you could have guests offer brief introductory remarks or go right into student questions. I allow ample time for guests to reply, and try to combine or cluster questions based on similar themes to streamline the process and try to get to all of the submitted questions. As the instructor, I "chair" or facilitate the panel and ask all of the questions, keep track of time, and shift conversations as necessary for time and focus.

- After the community panel (whether synchronous or asynchronous), students complete a brief GoogleForm to reflect on the experience. This form asks their name (for credit), two things they learned or found interesting from the presentation, and how panelists' work could inform or inspire their own work in/beyond the class. It also asks for feedback or comments for the panelists, which I anonymize and share with the guests.

Learning Outcomes

Students engaging in this activity will:

- Gain an understanding of ways to "go public" (Holmes; Mortensen) with their writing for social change

- Think critically about how community members' writing, and bite-size public writing opportunities can connect to their writing in and outside of class

- Connect more closely to the stakes and impacts of their writing for community members beyond academia

- Grow in self-empowerment to use their own writing for social change.

Learning Accommodations

- These activities can be done with in-person, remote, or hybrid class modalities, with adaptations mentioned above.

- The community panel can be synchronous (live, remote, or hybrid) or asynchronous (recorded) based on the constraints and opportunities of the course and community members' availability. If doing a live panel, encourage students to ask the questions they've already written out. If doing pre-recorded, ask the students' questions to the panelists yourself. The live option is certainly ideal in many ways, but the recorded option still allows for student voices through pre-submitted questions and offers flexibility for timing if guests cannot join during your class time. Pre-recorded is also beneficial if you are teaching multiple sections of the same course, in that you can use the same video for multiple sections.

- For any video (synchronous or asynchronous) subtitles or

captions should be used in compliance with current best practices for learners who are deaf or hard of hearing, such as the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) standards or the National Association of the Deaf (NAD)'s captioning requirements.

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