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Getting in Conversation about Activism: Group Podcast Assignment
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Overview

In my class on public rhetorics, I strive to empower students to possess agency in speaking to an unbounded global public with the understanding that all rhetors are constrained and imbricated in complex systems. Cooper writes, "Rhetors—and audiences—are agents in their actions, and they are responsible for those actions, but they are not the sole cause of what happens." (Cooper, 439). This assignment outlines instructions for facilitating students in creating a 20-60 minute "group podcast," but it could also be considered a scaffolded and recorded conversation, and the larger goal is not only to engage students in an activity that activates their internal belief in their ability to create positive modification through dialogue, but also to allow students to become more deeply immersed in awareness of rhetorical constraints. Students research aspects of a central theme individually and congregate (in person or online) to record a conversation wherein they share results of individual research and synthesize insights around the group's chosen central theme and around the theme of the course: Activism in a Global Public.

This assignment was created for a course titled ENG CMP 450 Writing for the Public, a public rhetorics course. Previous assignments in the course that this podcast was designed for include: a Wikipedia article, an edited video of found footage, and a circulation map. Ashley Holmes's "Public Writing for Social Change" offers an assignment in *Writing Spaces* on public writing and social change that is geared toward deepening an individual student's awareness of what it means to be an engaged citizen and could be used in connection with this podcast. Holmes writes, "While just one tweet or letter to the editor isn't going to lead to sweeping social change by itself, using

public writing to respond to the exigences of our current times can help us tap into networks that may advance a cause one step at a time." (200).

Central themes that we discuss prior to this group podcast assignment include: the notion of the public or a global public(s) (Wells), agency (Cooper), intertextuality (Bolter and Grusin), copyright law (Lessig, Johnson-Eilola & Selber), circulation (Edbauer-Rice, Gries, Queen), audience (Ede & Lunsford) and delivery (Porter). For the podcasting unit, we discuss ideas of narrative, strategies of interviewing, ethics related to intersectionality (Alcoff), and activism achieved using Critical Race Theory (CRT) counterstory (Martinez).

The assignment is a culminating assignment and occurs in the last 3-4 weeks of the semester. Prior to the recording of the podcast, preparatory assignments include: a podcast analysis, a tools and technology research assignment, and an individual research update. In class, demonstrations are given of key technology to support the assignment (primarily Audacity and ZenCastr) and to offer multiple options for recording and editing technology allowing students to engage despite their familiarity with technology. I also invite guest speakers from supporting university services to answer more complex questions and demonstrate software further.

Time Commitment

This assignment takes place over 4 weeks, including 3 weeks of in-class instruction, and a final week that occurs during finals week when students record the final podcast and submit the supporting documents. I use this assignment as a culminating end of semester project.

Materials

This assignment does require access to digital technology in the classroom and outside of the classroom. In-class materials include a

projector and a computer for in-class demonstrations of supporting software including but not limited to ZenCastr, Audacity, GarageBand, and Voice Memos (iPhone). Outside of the classroom, students will need access to a cell phone, tablet, or computer to record their conversations (using some combination of Voice Memos, Audacity, ZenCastr, or GarageBand), as well as access to a computer, tablet, or cell phone to edit the podcast (Audacity, GarageBand) and to create the supporting documents including an essay (GoogleDocs, MsWord), and a graphic title card (Canva, MsWord, Photoshop, etc.).

Assignment Process

Prior to the podcast unit:

- Students will notify me of their personal interest areas during a group paper-conference midway through the semester. I use this data to create interest or "affinity" groups of 3-4 with suggested research areas for each group, but groups are still at liberty to change the focus of their conversations. Previous affinity groups have included: urban planning, gender and sports, mental health and sports, the prison industrial complex, baking, food insecurity, and activism within popular music.

Week 1 (of 4)

- Students will review the prompt for the podcast unit in class and are given time in class to meet with their groups to exchange information and discuss ideas.

- For homework, students will complete an "Individual Tech Skills Research Assignment" that includes watching tutorial videos about audio editing software such as Audacity, Garageband, Adobe Audition or ProTools. While students are given a choice of software they can use, I focus in-class

discussion on Audacity and ZenCastr, both of which are free to students and easily accessible on and off campus.

- In class, students will practice interviewing one another. Students listen to an example interview and take turns practicing curiosity, asking questions of their peers, and restating insights to further dialogue and conversation.

Week 2 (of 4)

- Students will complete a podcast analysis for homework. In the analysis, students will choose a podcast on their own, listen to it, and discuss the podcast with the eyes of composers thinking about content, pacing, interaction, editing and narrative styles.

- In class, we discuss the idea of CRT Counterstory via Aja Martinez, and listen to a portion of "This Land" by Rebecca Nagel (chronicling the SCOTUS ruling on McGirt v Oklahoma in which much of eastern Oklahoma was re-designated as Native land (Wamsley)). Martinez offers one definition of counterstory as a "method of telling stories by people whose experiences are not often told. Counterstory as methodology thus serves to expose, analyze, and challenge stock stories of racial privilege and can help to strengthen traditions of social, political, and cultural survival and resistance." (Martinez 38). The purpose of this pairing is to demonstrate how a narrative can be used to present alternate realities and address social misconceptions, potentially using narrative, dialog and story telling as a way to create seeds of social change.

- Students will have time to discuss editing with a guest speaker from the university more familiar with podcasting and use of audio recording technology. At my institution, a consultant talks to the class from the Center for Teaching and Learning.

This figure demonstrates the use of the primary recording software ZenCastr (which functions similar to Zoom and offers students the ability to record online with high audio levels even if the students are in different locations). The guest speaker also fields questions from more advanced students and provides a point of contact for trouble shooting outside of just the teacher.

Week 3 (of 4)

- Students will complete an "Individual Research Component" Assignment, wherein they are tasked with doing various kinds of searches (academic databases, Twitter, and Wikipedia citations (James Purdy offers a thorough explanation in *Writing Spaces* of how to show students how to mindfully incorporate Wikipedia into their research practices) to explore content around their chosen sub-topic. Each group member decides to research a sub-topic of the group's parent topic, and this homework assignment ensures all group members are making progress in thinking about what to share with the group. For example, in a group that wrote about urban planning in Pittsburgh, one member researched the history of the Duquesne and Mount Washington Inclines, another researched the history of the Hill district (a culturally rich and historically underserved community), and a third researched urban planning more broadly in connection with the city of Pittsburgh.

- Students will complete an online journal response for homework individually and then discuss Linda Alcoff's "The Problem of Speaking for Others" in class the following day. Alcoff's text highlights aspects of ethics, essentialism, intersectionality, and privilege that may be present when students engage in critical conversations about the positionality of themselves and others in connection with

activism and social change.

Week 4 (of 4) – Submission Week During Finals

- Students will record their podcasts outside of a class at a time that is agreed upon by the group. Some students have chosen to do all group activity online and other groups elected to congregate in person for recording.

- Finally, students will submit their finished 20-60 minute podcast along with both a written group rationale and a written explanation of their individual contributions to the course. The rationale is required to contain a definition of activism created by the group in light of their experiences researching and talking with their group.

- In addition to the podcast and rationale, students will be asked to name their podcast (as if it were an ongoing series) and to create a "title card," or some kind of visual representation of their podcast as might be seen on Apple iTunes or Spotify. While this is not the most crucial part of the project, creating this visual unites all of the materials in a way that gives the finished assignment shape and vision. Students can envision themselves as hosts of a podcast rather than just having a conversation that the teacher listens to. This opens up the scope of the project to be one that is potentially public facing even though students are not required to distribute their podcasts on social media.

- Assessment and feedback is geared towards noting the intellectual moves made by the group that were valuable including positing new ideas, connecting to our course materials, and engaging meaningfully in the dialogue within the podcast. Students are praised for demonstrating consistent labor throughout the assignment, and I point out

how the conversation points to bigger ideas outside of the single conversation.

Learning Outcomes

Students engaging in this activity/assignment will:

- Share insights with each other that they may not have said in class due to fear or a lack of available class time

- Synthesize themes of the course related to activism, ideology, technology, ethics, and global rhetoric

- Engage mindfully with real world concepts and ideas

- Be exposed to new tools or practice literacy skills with a number of audio recording tools, digital design tools, and word processing software

- Engage in a substantial dialogue with peers about complex and layered topics

- Exercise agency and decision-making about their own thoughts and feelings in connection to core concepts of the course and to real-world ideas

- Think critically about the ways that social change is possible and feasible, while simultaneously thinking about the ways issues are complicated or constrained, making the implantation of social change within a complex and layered institution, system or society challenging, but possible.

Learning Accommodations

- This assignment can be completed fully remotely, or in person. The use of Zoom and Zencastr, as well as collaborative software like GoogleDocs / GoogleDrive

allowed for students to interact outside of class without physical contact. I created this assignment during the pandemic and students engaged with each other entirely over zoom and then pivoted later to a fully in-person format.

- Demonstrations with multiple types of recording software need to occur to allow students with varying literacy skills and with varying access levels to digital technology to engage. I demonstrate with students that a similar project can be completed with just a cell phone in lieu of more advanced tools and software.

- I set an expectation of 10 mins of recorded content per student, so this allows for groups with members who stop participating to figure out how to adjust the submitted content. This was important as many of my students continued to struggle with mental health challenges throughout the pandemic and attendance and engagement did fluctuate.

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