Writing Spaces

Assignments & Activities Archive

Activist Archival Project

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Overview

The Activist Archival Project we assign in our classes is well-suited for a composition course with an emphasis on writing for social change, community-engaged writing, and/or social justice. In this project, students work either in person or online documenting examples of social or environmental interventions occurring in their communities. Students actively engage in archiving local activist work, including photos and videos taken of street art installations, local protests, and other on-the-ground efforts; social media posts; screenshots of activist websites; news coverage featuring activists; and more. This project offers a multitude of possibilities for students to collect data and stories related to community activist efforts and allows one means of archiving and contributing to activists' online and on-the-ground action, supporting what activists are doing without getting in the way of their important work.

During the project, students are tasked with a number of different writing and research assignments, including writing proposals for which efforts they intend to focus on and why; collecting artifacts and compiling metadata; and writing an analysis essay in which students look for themes, threads, and concepts that emerged from the artifacts collected. Collecting and analyzing examples of activist interventions enables students to expand their conception of what "'counts' as valuable knowledge and writing" (Bates 211) and encourages them to identify "new places to look, new questions to ask, and new issues to consider" (Glenn and Enoch 12–13). Students become active researchers, along the way learning that "searching is both an art and a science" that requires "planning, patience, and persistence" (Yakel 113). At the same time, this project enables students to support and learn from what Whitney Douglas calls the "collaborative rhetorical invention" (31) undertaken by activists, a tactic many other

community literacy scholars (such as Carter and Mutnick) and technical communication scholars interested in social justice (such as Walton, Moore, and Jones) further advocate for.

Time Commitment

4–5 weeks

Materials

Materials required include laptop computers or tablets with Internet access for collecting digital artifacts. For the first three weeks, students will read and discuss one assigned article (Bates, Douglas, Wysocki) each week. Students also will need access to Google Sheets or Microsoft Excel to track the artifacts they gather.

Assignment Process

- Students will identify an activist issue or group to research. They will then write a brief proposal that explains why they have selected this particular issue or group to research and that outlines a detailed plan for completing the project.

- Next, students will begin documenting the rhetorical work done in relation to the issue they identified or that is being undertaken by the activist group they are researching. To do this, students will collect an archive of artifacts that might include but are not limited to: links to and/or screenshots of websites, blog posts, YouTube videos, and other online content; downloaded images from Flickr or other photo sharing sites and/or screen shots of social media posts (such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram); news articles or coverage from mainstream and independent media sources; photos of material artifacts (such as protest signs, artwork, or other items on display); and "official" documents (including reports, studies, press releases, fliers, or other materials posted

or distributed in the community by specific governments, businesses, or organizations).

- Students will save the artifacts on their computers in a dedicated folder so they can access them throughout the project. In addition, they will create a spreadsheet to track relevant information about each artifact they find, which might include screenshots and/or hyperlinks to documents or the actual document itself as well as information such as: document genre, document description, date created and/or distributed, who created it (and, if applicable, the organization or business they are associated with), genre through which it was distributed (if different from the genre itself) and/or where the genre was found, observations on how it was taken up (was it shared? reproduced in multiple places? did people comment on it?), and comments (any relevant notes, observations, or information students think might be important).

- Students should spend at least two weeks gathering artifacts. Instructors should check in with students frequently as they collect artifacts so they can discuss challenges, highlight interesting finds, and ensure students stay on track with their research. Once students have developed a robust archive of artifacts, they will analyze the materials in relation to concepts, theories, and methodologies from class readings and discussions. Students will write a 4- to 5-page analysis paper highlighting their findings.

- Finally, students will present an overview of their analysis in a brief (approximately 5- to 7-minute) class presentation. The presentation should include a visual supplement (such as Google Slides or Microsoft PowerPoint slides) that incorporates images of relevant artifacts from their archive.

Learning Outcomes

Students engaging in this activity/assignment will:

- Research and develop a nuanced perspective on a complex issue

- Study actual activist writing occurring in a specific community

- Support that community's work by archiving their efforts

- Analyze and reflect on the archived documents and what can be learned from studying the curated collection

- Present their findings to an audience of their peers

Learning Accommodations

- Students may choose to work alone or collaborate on this project.

- Material should be presented in multiple formats to include in-person instruction and asynchronous, digital delivery.

Works Cited

Bates, Julie Collins. "Activist Archival Research, Environmental Intervention, and the Flint Water Crisis." *Reflections*, vol. 19, no. 2, 2020, pp. 208–239.

Carter, Shannon, and Deborah Mutnick. "Writing Democracy: Notes on a Federal Writers' Project for the 21st Century." *Community Literacy Journal*, vol. 7, no. 1, 2012, pp. 1–14.

Douglas, Whitney. "Looking Outward: Archival Research as

Community Engagement." *Community Literacy Journal*, vol. 11, no. 2, 2017, pp. 30–42.

Glenn, Cheryl, and Jessica Enoch. "Invigorating Historiographic Practices in Rhetoric and Composition Studies." *Working in the Archives: Practical Research Methods for Rhetoric and Composition*, edited by Alexis E. Ramsey, Wendy B. Sharer, Barbara L'Epplattenier, and Lisa S. Mastrangelo, Southern Illinois University Press, 2010, pp. 11–27.

Walton, Rebecca, Kristen Moore, and Natasha Jones. *Technical Communication After the Social Justice Turn: Building Coalitions for Action*. Routledge, 2019.

Wysocki, Rick. "Disidentification and Documentation: LGBTQ Records as Emergent, Entangled Rhetoric." *Rhetoric Review*, vol. 39, no. 2, 2020, pp. 174–187.

Yakel, Elizabeth. "Searching and Seeking in the Deep Web: Primary Sources on the Internet." *Working in the Archives: Practical Research Methods for Rhetoric and Composition*, edited by Alexis E. Ramsey, Wendy B. Sharer, Barbara L'Epplattenier, and Lisa S. Mastrangelo, Southern Illinois University Press, 2010, pp. 102–118.

Further Reading

Dadas, Caroline. "Hashtag Activism: The Promise and Risk of 'Attention.'" *Social Writing/Social Media: Publics, Presentations, and Pedagogies*, edited by Stephanie Vie and Douglas Walls, WAc Clearinghouse, 2017, pp. 17–36.

Edwards, Dustin W., and Bridget Gelms. "The Rhetorics of Platforms: Definitions, Approaches, Futures." *Present Tense*, vol. 6, no. 3, 2018.

McVey, James Alexander, and Heather Suzanne Woods. "Anti-racist Activism and the Transformational Principles of Hashtag Publics: From #HandsUpDontShoot to #PantsUpDontLoot." *Present Tense*, vol. 5, no. 3, 2016, pp. 1–9.

Vie, Stephanie. "In Defense of 'Slacktivism': The Human Rights Campaign Facebook Logo as Digital Activism." *First Monday*, vol. 19, no. 4, 2014.

Williams, Sherri. "#SayHerName: Using Digital Activism to Document Violence Against Black Women." *Feminist Media Studies*, vol. 16, no. 5, 2016, pp. 922–925.