“Engaging Class Struggles”: Preparing Students for the “Real World” by Teaching “Activist” Cultural Production in the Classroom

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ABSTRACT In this self-reflective essay, the author argues that communication studies offers opportunities for integrating activism with classroom content that is useful for teaching both academic knowledge and practical skills, while actively engaging students in subject matter that is of direct interest. Despite the deterioration of faculty working (and student learning) conditions, he argues that there is space for activist scholars to draw from their commitments and engage in forms of critical pedagogy that also meet student desires for professional skills. After offering an overview of his own teaching philosophy and background, he provides examples of content, assignments, and readings to illustrate how both critical thinking and writing skills are taught and student “disengagement” overcome.

KEYWORDS Communication studies; Critical pedagogy; Rhetorical analysis; Alternative media; Scholar activism

Introduction
Few subjects at university offer better opportunities for integrating “activism” into the classroom than the interdisciplinary field of communication studies. Through the

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process of developing assignments to teach students critical thinking and writing skills over many years, I have found that certain types of assignments (and topics) have the potential to engage students more actively than more conventional assignments. This article argues that it is possible to engage disengaged students by teaching “real world” forms of cultural production around issues of direct or immediate interest and through teaching both academic knowledge and practical skills. This is not an either-or proposition: instructors can meet the objectives of the curriculum, the program, and the university as well as address students’ interests in careers and academics’ own goals as “activist scholars.” After the initial discussion of activism, the article provides a thumbnail sketch of my teaching philosophy and background, situating my classroom approach in terms of a brief discussion of “scholar-activism” and critical pedagogy, and in the context of right-wing “culture wars” and budget cuts. The last section provides examples of course subjects, assignments, and readings that actively engage students and address both academic and activist commitments.

Activism

Activism is frequently invoked and rarely defined. Most assume its meaning is readily understood: i.e., “left wing” or anti-establishment. Yet, as defined in the Encyclopedia of Activism and Social Justice, activism is potentially more ideologically encompassing: “Activism is action on behalf of a cause, action that goes beyond what is conventional or routine” (Martin, 2007, p. 20). The general bias that equates activism with anti-establishment or left-wing actions ignores right-wing activist academics and senior administrators whose actions go “beyond what is conventional or routine” and enable the contemporary, corporatized, neoliberal university. Thanks to critical activist scholars, we know of corporate-backed activist groups that mislead the public about, for example, climate change and tobacco, and that right-wing, activist think tanks produce “studies” that always propose the same free-market answer (see Gutstein, 2009). Professors whose work supports the dominant worldview or status quo are no less activist than those who challenge the status quo.

More significantly, however, activism also refers to the actions of those who “are typically challengers to policies and practices, trying to achieve a social goal, not to obtain power themselves” (Martin, 2007, p. 20). This describes more closely the context of a professor in a classroom encouraging students to think critically about the world than those whose support of the status quo can mean more power or financial rewards for themselves. Thus, this definition of “activism” is more amenable to that engendered through critical pedagogy than that which strengthens the powerful. Nonetheless, I would still argue that there are two types of “activist scholars”: one type supports hegemony; the other supports those at the bottom (Fox Piven, 2010).

Decades of right-wing polemics in the “culture wars” have shaped the public’s perception of both activists and universities, making it appear second nature that universities are a bastion of radical professors. Faculty are no more impervious to these pervasive polemics than anyone else, and most tenure-track professors are neither “activist-scholars” nor subversives dedicated to challenging, let alone overthrowing, the system. Indeed, professors incorporating critical readings into their syllabi do not necessarily influence all students, nor do they influence them to think in only one way,
since that assumes that all students read and identify with the material, and that all are open to new or critical ideas. Given how much socialization or ideological indoctrination students have undergone prior to university, it might take more than a one-semester course to produce an activist. This is why the right-wing fear of a “radical professoriate” is overblown, and those students who do think “outside the box” and challenge the status quo are more a testament to their own development as critical thinkers, a process that individual scholars, practising critical pedagogy, may have contributed to or helped.

Critical pedagogy

Although critical pedagogy is a “big tent” that encompasses an array of techniques and topics, Jonathan Martin outlines four key aspects that underpin this form of education:

- “critical content,” which includes materials and assignments that, in my courses, encourage the critical investigation of contemporary contexts, inequalities and conditions of public communication, and “the identification, assessment, and deconstruction of dominant discourse and consideration of perspectives that question the status quo”
- “student-centred, dialogic process,” which includes discussions that encourage students “to consider and expand the subject matter through detailed reflection on its relevance to their daily lives”
- a “democratic process” in the classroom to encourage active participation and all views in discussions, and which can extend to including “student input concerning course policies and decisions”
- a “self-reflective process,” where students are asked “to apply the analysis to our college and class” while the professor might also reflect privately on classroom dynamics and related developments to make adjustments to the course as necessary (J. Martin, 2008, pp. 39–40).

In an attempt to engage in a limited form of activism within institutional constraints, I, like others, have focused on “critical content” and “student-centred, dialogic process,” drawing on the other two aspects to some extent (including this article’s self-reflective subject matter) (e.g., Fox, 2012; Huish, 2013). This process is similar to and, for me, inspired by Paulo Freire’s “conscientization,” which is usually translated and understood as “critical consciousness” or “consciousness raising.” However, Freire’s concept goes beyond developing a critical understanding of how power works and shapes our perceptions of the world around us to include taking action to change the world within which we live (Freire, 1970).

This inclusion of taking action to change the world can mean a range of possibilities, which are partly dependent upon subject matter. Recognizing limitations of what is possible within the literature classroom, for example, Nicholas Fox (2012) focuses on “texts as tactics” so students can see how literature might be used beyond the classroom, encouraging them “to refine their ideas about how to speak politically” while still meeting “obvious traditional learning outcomes” (Fox, 2012, p. 18). While Fox represents one of the more common approaches to activism, or “conscientization,” in the classroom, Robert Huish (2013) offers a much less common, albeit more direct, example of teaching activism as “a skill of effective engagement with those in authority and
with fellow citizens ... enhancing democracy” (p. 364). This development studies course elicited resistance from Huish’s institution and even from some of his colleagues, since activism is more conventionally understood as taking action outside the classroom, but it is still “conscientization” (p. 364).

Whereas neither approach—teaching textual tactics (e.g., Fox, 2012) or street protest (e.g., Huish, 2013)—is a panacea to the present crisis of the university or democracy under neoliberalism, both offer ways of engaging students by drawing upon or teaching activism in the classroom, and in this way meet our responsibilities as both educators and active citizens. The increasing emphasis to teach “real world,” job-ready skills is possibly more about pressuring professors “to avoid the political on campus” than concerns about graduate (un)employment (Huish, 2013, p. 365). However, as my experience demonstrates, it is not, as Huish also suggests, an “either-or” proposition, since we can prepare our students for life after graduation as both active, critical citizens and as members of the workforce (2013, p. 365).

As part of the process of thinking about how to incorporate aspects of critical pedagogy into our programs and departments, it is also necessary to consider the difference between the types of students encountered by Freire and by U.S. and Canadian educators. It is difficult within the circumstances of the contemporary university to dissolve the hierarchy of the teacher-student relationship as part of the “liberation of the oppressed” when many students are among the most indulged and privileged to date. The contrast between informal educational work in rural Brazil (the focus of Freire’s work) and the formal structures of U.S. or Canadian higher education is considerable. According to Jonathan Martin (2008), his American students “were more resistant to learning than the illiterate Brazilian peasants” because the former “already were alienated from many years of bureaucratic and authoritarian schooling” (p. 33). These U.S. students “had developed a more instrumental view of education through ... growing financial and time pressures and ... [a] culture that stresses materialism and occupational achievement” (Martin, 2008, p. 33). This description could also apply to many students at Wilfrid Laurier University (WLU), where, in my experience, their “intense educational estrangement” (Martin, 2008, p. 31) or “disengagement” (Côté & Allahar, 2011) requires adapting aspects of Freire’s critical pedagogy, such as his emphasis on “conscientization” via “critical content” and “student-centred, dialogic process,” to the conditions and context within which we teach and students learn.

As someone from a working-class background, I empathize with student anxieties about higher education and job prospects as economic concerns intrude upon the classroom. This is perhaps why Ira Shor’s approach to teaching working-class students in New York City is most applicable to the classroom for many middle-class students as well, at least since the beginning of the financial crisis in 2008. For example, Shor (1980) advanced what he called “contextual skill-development,” whereby “cognitive skills ... [are] developed through a problematic examination of a real context, drawn from student life” (p. 104). I found this approach to be the most useful for working with communication studies majors, whose primary desire is for a communications-related career, even though most appear to be unaware of just how important language and writing skills are to such careers. Indeed, a consequence of the mass expansion of the under-
graduate cohort in the twenty-first century includes students graduating out of high school without the basic academic skills necessary to study at university (see Côté & Allahar, 2011). To adapt critical pedagogy to my own situation and institutional context (including constraints, such as the 36-hour semester, grading expectations and structures, and large class sizes), I have tried to think through how best to integrate into my teaching such diverse concerns as students’ professional prospects, educational (dis)engagement, and the necessary disciplinary rigour for learning language and writing skills, which is why, for me, the role of the teacher remains important (see Gimenez, 1998).

Nonetheless, Shor’s (1980) work has been more inspirational than programmatic. Only in the “self-reflective” process of writing this article have I thought again explicitly of his work, even though I realize that it has been a subconscious aspect of my approach to pedagogy from my earliest days of working in adult education: critical pedagogy as “philosophical framework” rather than as a “method” to be imitated (Reynolds, 2015).

“Real world” relevance

Right-wing pundits in Canadian media have picked up on the American Right’s long-standing “culture war” on the academy and regularly attack higher education as not relevant to the “real world” by focusing on a course title or description signifying activism or critical thought. But what could be more relevant than a course that, for example, enables students to better understand the gap between the rhetoric and the reality of the workaday world or political-economic system, such as the ways in which their labour is exploited? Or one that includes debates over the role of student debt as a means to download university costs onto future generations? There is a significant contradiction between the claims of senior administrators, who promote a bachelor of arts degree on the basis of the future monetary value or “return on investment,” and the low wages they pay to contract professors with not one, but often three degrees. Should students not have the opportunity to analyze why they are paying higher fees for larger class sizes, fewer choices, and less qualified instructors? (Cuts imposed by senior administrators have compelled departments to employ undergraduates instead of graduate students as “teaching assistants,” called “instructional assistants,” and before that, MA students had replaced ABDs and PhDs, a process that undermines the university’s very raison d’être.)

These kinds of questions can act as topical themes for “liberatory learning” whereby “profound changes can occur through a critical study of ordinary life” (Shor, 1980, p. 104). Discussing such matters in the classroom provides students with the opportunity to exchange ideas about the role of higher education, a topic about which they usually hold strong views. Providing material of direct concern to even the most disengaged students can be a means to help them discern the way language is used and arguments are framed—if they understand the arguments correctly. One example of a frequent misreading of a topical theme is Jeffrey Williams’ (2006) article “Debt Education.” Writing for the general public, Williams challenges the idea that student debt teaches “fiscal literacy,” but most students “read” it as if he supports that idea. The article thus serves as a valuable introduction in my class for debates about the relationship between society and higher education, and whether university should be
free, a topic that engages students who might not otherwise participate in class discussions. As a contrast to their misreading and uncritical acceptance of “debt as fiscal literacy,” I offer a personal anecdote about the number of weeks I worked at minimum wage each summer to pay for university prior to graduating debt free; once we compare the number of weeks they have to work to pay their tuition fees (up to four times more) and frequently with an average debt of more than $20,000, an open and lively discussion ensues. This exercise helps students to begin to question other dominant economic and political ideas, and the connections between abstract concepts (e.g., neoliberalism, education policies) and their everyday experiences, opening up the contrast between official rhetoric and lived reality (see J. Martin, 2008; Shor, 1980).

**Activist scholars**

A booming literature on the relationship between academia and activism ranges across disciplines, including education, sociology, history, and communication studies (e.g., Cox, 2015; Croteau, 2005; Napoli & Aslama, 2011; Smeltzer & Cantillon, 2015). Although the history varies between disciplines, “scholar-activism” may have intensified since the financial crisis. As Smeltzer and Cantillon (2015) argue,

> [G]iven the conditions of neoliberalism and the educational and societal repercussions of a deteriorating welfare state, many scholars feel a stronger pull than ever to engage in activism that aims to make a difference in the lives of others. (p. 7)

Yet there are differences in how scholars balance their activist and scholarly commitments. Some scholars are committed to working with, and as part of, social movements and whose position in the academy is thus used in support of such commitments (e.g., Huish, 2013). There are other scholars, however, who have “a faith in ‘critical scholarship’ isolated from agency” or are predisposed toward “policy makers and mainstream media as primary audiences” or working within “existing institutional frameworks as pathways to substantive social change” (Cox, 2015, p. 34). It is also important to recognize that activist commitments to social movements are not always easy to balance with personal and professional responsibilities, particularly as senior administrators, activists in their own ways, seek changes to traditional governance structures and faculty autonomy, and demand of faculty increased “productivity” in publishing outputs and securing research grants, the teaching of larger class sizes, and greater service in such areas as recruitment and retention (see Bailey & Freedman, 2011; Hanke & Hearn, 2012; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004).

In some respects, Antonio Gramsci’s theory of hegemony and organic versus traditional intellectuals is more pertinent in attempting to strategically rethink the demands between scholarship and activism than approaches that focus more in terms of immediate (program or classroom) demands or needs (e.g., Cox, 2015; Pimlott, 2014a). Contrary to Laurence Cox’s (2015) perspective, I prefer the term “activist scholar” to “scholar activist,” since our primary role as a professional “scholar” predominates (that is, in acknowledging our paid role and functions), but the “activist” adjective designates our commitment or positioning as an “organic intellectual” working alongside or as part of social movements. The term also recognizes our positions...
as “professional intellectuals” who have a potential “public platform” separate from any connection to social movements themselves. For me, this platform has meant working closely with working-class organizations, such as unions and anti-poverty groups, and also intervening independently via media in public discussions (e.g., Pimlott, 2014a, 2014b).

Since the financial crisis of 2008, I have been compelled to turn to my own working conditions as an activist scholar because of decisions made by senior administrators at my university regarding, for example, contract faculty, class sizes, and institutional governance (see, for example, Pimlott, 2014b; Potter, 2015). The growing literature on neoliberalism and the university (e.g., Bailey & Freedman, 2011; Giroux, 2014; Hanke & Hearn, 2012; Potter, 2015; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004) attests to a widespread awareness about university instructors’ working conditions (about which many in our profession are even paid to research, publish, and teach). Moneys not expended to pay salaries, benefits, and expense accounts of the ever-expanding ranks of senior administrators are transferred from operations to buildings and other capital assets as cuts are made to classes and programs (Brownlee, 2015; Kramer & Ferguson, 2016; Potter, 2015; Smith, 2010).

If the public pays our salaries, do we not have a moral, an ethical, or even just a fiduciary responsibility to teach and research in the public interest? As scholars, activist or not, we should be working to support the public interest over governments and corporate interests, especially given that the latter are often more powerful than the former and influence public policies to private advantage. Think tanks, for example, produce “research” that serves to justify or legitimize “market fundamentalist” outcomes for public policies that will benefit few (Gutstein, 2009, 2014). It is against this overwhelming dominance that activist scholars act as the proverbial “David” against the neoliberal corporate-state “Goliath” that benefits from the unbearable burden of apathy, alienation, and inertia in society. I, therefore, see the vital aim of research and teaching to be about encouraging an active (if not “activist”) citizenry to ensure that democracy is inclusive and governments enact laws for the benefit of all and not just a privileged few. The next section, after sketching out my background and teaching philosophy, highlights some of the ways in which I approach encouraging an active, critical-thinking citizenry in my classroom.

Teaching philosophy and background
My approach to teaching, activism, and scholarship has been influenced by my working-class background and experience of exploitation at work. I have worked at a range of jobs, from casual farm labourer, dishwasher, and library assistant to adult educator, trainee video editor, and radio journalist, with periods of unemployment and training in between. I worked long hours while studying “full time” for my BA, and I worked full time while studying part time for my MA and PhD.

After my “real world” experience dealing with the arbitrary and, at times, capricious power of employers and managers, I am quite familiar with injustice both as an abstract concept and as a personal injury. Given that I am now better protected than most other workers, I believe I have a moral duty as a scholar to speak out about injustice. Educators such as myself are practically the only profession that is so well sit-
uated in terms of workplace autonomy and academic freedom, and we have the requisite skills, resources, and (for some) time necessary to support struggles for social justice. However, as governments and administrations change their approach to the ways in which the university is being run, there is a greater need for faculty to become more active on campus, in addition to other struggles, to protect the viability, quality, and integrity of universities’ educational missions (see, for example, Brownlee, 2015; Kramer & Ferguson, 2016; Pimlott, 2014b; Potter, 2015).

Since arriving at WLU in 2001, I have designed, written, and distributed leaflets and posters, delivered speeches, walked picket lines, engaged in media relations, designed and edited newsletters, blogged and tweeted, and run workshops on media relations and advocacy communications, all outside of my regular scholarly duties (some of which meets service obligations). This activist work was conducted with many groups, including two local Public Information Research Groups, the Waterloo Regional Labour Council and the Canadian Labour Congress, the Ontario Coalition for Social Justice, and the Kitchener Centre New Democratic Party. I was also engaged in communications work on several campaigns for my faculty association (WLUFSA), including media relations during the 2008 contract faculty strike, and helping to found, name, and edit the *WLUFSA Advocate* for its first two years.

My involvement in these “extracurricular” activities, which I consider to be activism, has not only helped me to hone old professional skills and develop new ones, but also contributed to my scholarship on such topics as print media, intellectuals, and political communication (see, for example, Pimlott, 2011, 2014a, 2015). It has furthered my focus on the process of communication—understanding who your audience is and how to persuade them—a challenging task when working against the dominant “common sense.” My participation in public campaigns has been particularly helpful in designing courses that examine the practices that make up “public communication” (e.g., journalism and advocacy communication; alternative media; strategic communications and social movements).

If a well-functioning democracy is built upon the active engagement of citizens in deliberating over policy and governance, then every scholar should incorporate the means to encourage students-as-citizens to be active, critical thinkers. As I tell students, paraphrasing Marshall Berman, even if they are not interested in politics, “politics is interested in them.” Ideas are turned into policies that, in turn, directly affect their lives in all sorts of ways, from tuition fees and minimum wages to local noise bylaws and student loan repayment plans.

**Courses**

My courses have been developed within a context of teaching a predominantly white, middle-class, female student population, which is becoming more diversified, at a primarily undergraduate institution, Wilfrid Laurier University, with its main campus located in the City of Waterloo. Students vary in their motivation to enrol in communication studies, and although there is a contingent of dedicated, concerned students, those who are “disengaged” and career oriented appear to predominate.

It is from within this context that I approach the field, focusing on the persuasive practices of private organizations and state institutions employed to bring about
changes in politics, the economy, and society from which they benefit. To encourage students to think critically, they need to understand that the present conditions and structures of society are also the result of social movement struggles over generations that have attempted to counter, change, and/or transform existing conditions. Thus, my second-year Public Communication course, for example, locates the rise of communication between, to, and for different publics in the struggles for a more inclusive, democratic society alongside the rise of capitalism. It focuses on the production and circulation of political and commercial messages (e.g., journalism, public relations, advocacy communication); their producers (e.g., journalists, PR practitioners, social movement advocates); and sponsoring organizations, which include not only conventional media but also political parties, think tanks, corporations, unions, and so on. This course introduces students to rhetorical analysis so they can better understand how commercial and political messages work to persuade them.

In this and my other courses, I integrate opportunities for students to study and develop social and economic justice campaigns or alternative media. Most students find learning to produce different media forms and communication genres a challenge, but they also welcome the change from traditional academic essays and exams. In my third-year Alternative Media course, for instance, students draw upon their skills and interests to produce their own alternative media. These projects are meant to address a target audience on a controversial issue in a persuasive manner. When the City of Waterloo introduced a new noise bylaw several years ago, some students wrote “manifestos” against it. From studying manifestos, they had learned how to channel their criticisms into persuasive polemical appeals that their peers would find compelling. I stress to students that, in writing manifestos or creating zines or websites around issues of social injustice, they do not need to display the same kind of “balance” as is expected in journalism or academic essays. This does not mean, however, that they can ignore counter-arguments when producing their media projects. On the contrary, these kinds of assignments require the students (as rhetors) to understand the dominant assumptions that underpin the “ruling worldview” and “common sense” thinking in order to articulate arguments or polemical appeals that are persuasive enough with their target audiences to overcome or refute dominant discourses. This usually means critically examining their own ways of thinking about the topic they are tackling.

Students are made aware through these exercises that it is easier to see assumptions and errors in views that we oppose than in those that underlie our own worldviews. It is also much more challenging to write a persuasive, counter-hegemonic message to win over an audience of one’s peers than it is to write a text supporting the status quo that can rely upon taken-for-granted assumptions and “common sense.” Students whose beliefs in the dominant ideology are reinforced during this process still learn to recognize how messages attempt to persuade their target audiences through various rhetorical techniques. One might say that this is my adaptation of a combination of the “conscientization” process (Freire, 1970) and “contextual skill-development” (Shor, 1980).

One of the earliest examples for me of the connections that students can make between their “real world” experience and the communication studies classroom took
place about a decade ago. A fourth-year student, who was working at a local pub, witnessed the owner severely reprimanding several employees, most of whom were not students. She wrote a letter to her employer criticizing him for his treatment of her coworkers. After an exchange of letters, the owner fired the student and the other employees. This seemingly apolitical student and her fired co-workers decided to organize themselves into a one-day picket of the pub to persuade people not to patronize the establishment, complete with leaflets and specially designed T-shirts incorporating the pub’s logo with the word “reject” emblazoned across them. Her alternative media project became the documentation of this action, including the materials she used for the picket. She then chose to discuss the process and purpose of the protest with the class. In so doing, this student made connections between her work and our class readings and discussions: she realized that she could act for herself and with others, even if unsuccessfully, against the arbitrary, “real world” power of her employer. Two years later, I was “blind copied” on an email complaint sent by this student to a radio station manager for airing an ad opposed to same-sex marriage. This student’s “conscientization” process was partly serendipitous, due to her experience at work, and partly predictable, because of the “real world” relevance of the course materials to her working and learning conditions. If the university’s claim is that it wants student experience to be relevant to the “real world,” as citizens “actively” engaged in the world, then surely this class met that criterion.

In other courses that I teach, there is a more substantial engagement with specific issues that meet the criteria for topical themes and/or “critical content,” such as taxation, poverty, and debt. Students study such subjects, their representation, key arguments, and assumptions, especially as they are presented in “common sense” expressions (e.g., “If you work hard, you will succeed”). Most students accept such expressions without necessarily recognizing their layered meanings (Shor, 1980). By introducing students to the close textual analysis of neoliberal ideology in dominant public discourses and common sense, I help them take apart common metaphors and expressions used in economic issues in order to see how language is employed to persuade them of ideas that might run counter to their interests (e.g., Aune, 2001; Horner, 2011). As part of my effort to help students become better masters of language, rhetoric, and the “art of persuasion,” we study some popular genres of advocacy communication, such as agitational leaflets and opinion columns. I then ask them to produce their own advocacy message on issues such as student debt or the minimum wage. Engaging students in these practical and personal issues can encourage a more direct, if seemingly self-interested, engagement with both “real world” and academic content.

Although I make use of social media and digital tools, I argue for the continued importance of traditional media genres, such as letters to the editor and opinion editorials (i.e., op-eds), and of “disposable literature” (“dip-lit”) as integral components in communication tactics and campaign strategies (Pimlott, 2011). This emphasis stresses both the accessibility and materiality of such basic communication forms, as well as the importance of the rhetorical process and writing for target audiences. Although these forms might not be “academic” genres, they require students to apply critical thinking and develop persuasive writing skills.
Language and writing

As a communications scholar and former media professional, I understand the importance of language and writing for success in both the university and the “real world” (i.e., in the communication professions). I let students know that my employment as a media professional was at least in part due to my liberal arts education. I also stress that language is their “toolbox,” and if they are going to “master their trade” and secure their “dream job” as a media or public relations professional, then they need to learn to use language effectively. Despite most students’ poor preparation for academic writing and their varying levels of disengagement, universities continue to face cuts to educational resources and faculty. This means that we face ever greater obstacles to providing the necessary support for student success: larger classes; fewer full-time faculty; and more contract faculty with less time and resources necessary to address student needs. Yet neither university administrations nor provincial governments appear concerned, even as the former continue to shift money out of operations (i.e., education) into capital assets and other expenditures (see Côté & Allahar, 2011; Kramer & Ferguson, 2016; Potter, 2015; Smith, 2010).

Thus, I try to incorporate a variety of assignments in my courses that help to redress students’ weaknesses while coping with worsening working and learning conditions for faculty and students respectively. As a case in point, I use a news release exercise to drive home the importance of accuracy and precision in their written work. I take students through the basics of producing a news release with some examples, which involves workshopping the process in class before assigning the one-page exercise. Drawing on my own professional experience, I emphasize how a news editor responds to news releases as a means of illustrating the importance of accuracy and precision in communicating with journalists (one does not, however, need to have professional media experience to do this exercise with a class). The importance of the accuracy, precision, and veracity of a news release, the “workhorse” of public relations, is fundamental to the professional success of public relations practitioners seeking coverage from news outlets for their clients or employers. I point out that if a news editor has to make decisions about which news releases to cover, those with even a single mistake are less likely to be used because if the editor finds one mistake, how does she know that that is the only one? For this exercise, I subtract one percent out of the assignment’s total mark of 10 percent (of the course grade) for every error in spelling, grammar, or syntax. Some alumni have told me years later that it is the one exercise they still remember from their undergraduate studies. These alumni include a few who have secured jobs by knowing how to produce a news release during the application process and/or by submitting a copy of their revised news release to prospective employers. This exercise is also a useful way to engage students in critically comparing news coverage with news releases put out by corporations, governments, unions, and so on.

Op-eds are another useful type of text to get students thinking critically about language that attempts to persuade audiences. There is plenty of fodder from right-wing columnists in mainstream outlets, such as the Globe and Mail and National Post, including a range of persuasive, rhetorical techniques that help to illustrate differences in arguments and the assumptions upon which they rely (see Patriquin, 2004). By
drawing upon op-eds that focus on topics of direct concern to students (e.g., debt, employability), many students appear to be more willing to question, if not challenge, “common sense” assumptions underlying dominant, right-wing arguments. Such an encounter should encourage any serious student to think twice before accepting the authority of any message (including the professor’s). Occasionally, I am able to find an opinion column from the few critical or centre-left opinion writers that are still published in mainstream media outlets (e.g., Linda McQuaig, Rick Salutin) to help students understand how different perspectives rely upon different assumptions and to show that there is more than one way to frame an issue.

Students in my third-year Alternative Media course are usually given the choice of producing a media project as a major part of their assessment. Although the course is not designed for teaching media practice, the emphasis on counter-hegemonic ideologies, practices, and movements highlights their differences from corporate and state media ideologies, practices, and forces. Although students can choose whatever medium they want, dip-lit offers one of the most accessible (in terms of costs and skills) and most comprehensive media forms to produce: to create, for example, a leaflet or fly-poster requires one to develop, design, write, and revise a persuasive message that integrates form and content for its target audience (Pimlott, 2011). Student plans must include some general costing that considers whether it is a serial or one-off project, or whether it will require revenue generation or a subscriber base. Although not all students take the time to think through these “side” issues, they are central to alternative media success or survival. In the end, many students produce alternative media projects that have been quite well thought out. Issues such as style, grammar, and design might be challenging at times for students, but they almost uniformly enjoy the opportunity to create their own media. I retain the research paper as an option for those who prefer academic projects.

The graduate version of my Strategic Communications and Social Movements course includes a close examination of the language, media, and campaigns carried out by neoliberal political parties and governments over the past four decades (e.g., Gutstein, 2009; Kozolanka, 2007). As part of a Gramscian framework, we begin with a focus on the role played by a small group of intellectuals who propagate neoliberal thinking via the strategic targeting of specific audiences. They begin by identifying wealthy individuals to obtain funding to establish think tanks, and then target individual journalists, broadcasters, and editors as well as academics, before targeting political elites, via lobbying, mailings, seminars, conferences, and other forms of person-to-person communication.

The objective of this type of group is to secure the support of leading figures in both the private and public sectors before targeting the general public via a broader propaganda campaign conducted through the mass media. We focus on understanding neoliberalism’s hegemony as a constant process of negotiation, which means going beyond examining governments elected or policies enacted, to draw upon the methods of critical discourse and rhetorical analysis to understand how neoliberalism’s hegemony is carried in the very words we use and frames within which we think (Aune, 2001; Holborow, 2012). This also requires us to cover the “communication space” in
between the micro level of language on one side and the macro level of governments on the other, for which I use Garth Jowett and Victoria O’Donnell’s (2006) accessible and systematic approach to analyzing public campaigns by powerful organizations, because Jowett and O’Donnell cover practically every conceivable aspect involved in the persuasion of audiences, from context and background to the use of media coverage, different communication tactics, and even counter-propaganda techniques and strategies.

After investigating how neoliberalism became hegemonic, we focus upon anti-poverty, low-wage, and union campaigns that have sought to redress fundamental inequities or injustices that resulted from, or were exacerbated by, neoliberalism. Students are introduced to thinking about how an organization or coalition might develop a systematic counter-hegemonic campaign to try to change the dominant “common sense” or beliefs around a particular issue. Student teams have developed and designed local campaigns, based on an analysis of the existing local conditions and media for the Waterloo Region, to reach out to students about “wage theft,” local residents about urban poverty, and business owners about a living wage.

I ask students to try to identify problems with different local, regional, and/or national campaigns conducted in the past by various labour and social movement organizations. Many students enjoy applying academic analysis to professional communication materials to identify flaws in and suggest improvements to the use of language, images, and tactics. This process prompts students to think in terms of non-linguistic aspects, such as colour, imagery, and layout, as well as linguistic elements, including the use of particular metaphors or common sense expressions, via different media formats, such as print, broadcast, and online, to appeal to various target audiences. The process of using rhetorical analysis to take apart various examples of dpllit, op-eds, social media, and news coverage prepares students for thinking through their own campaigns and, as a result, many have produced materials to professional standards. If senior administrators (and right-wing pundits) do not believe that liberal arts or communication studies graduates are as employable as engineers or business majors, it might be that their ideology prevents them from recognizing that national and international non-governmental organizations, unions, and social justice networks employ such graduates to produce public campaigns.6

One particularly poignant anecdote about the “real world” relevance of the kinds of topics and issues I introduce to my classes comes from my first graduate course on strategic communications and social movements. Students preparing a campaign on the previously unknown (to them) phenomenon of “wage theft” quickly realized that they and/or their partners had been victims of wage theft. The learning curve can be quite steep for students with little experience of how the “real world” operates or without the conceptual tools to analyze (and therefore understand) it, as dominant groups have little interest in revealing dubious practices that benefit the few. Yet it is critical to students’ lives that they understand such phenomena to better prepare themselves for the “real world.”

“Resources of hope”
Within the constraints of this self-reflective article, I have suggested that, even within
the contemporary neoliberal university, there is space for activist scholars to engage in critical pedagogy. Using one’s personal involvement in activism can both contribute to developing engaging course content and assignments, ideally overcoming some of the resistance of the disengaged student, and meeting academic and university requirements, despite the deterioration of our working (and student learning) conditions. Courses, such as those outlined above, are “resources of hope”7 as they contribute to the vitality of the ongoing democratic project by encouraging active citizenship, as students not only learn about how the “real world” within which they live and work operates, but they also acquire the skills necessary to participate effectively and constructively in both society and their professional careers. Thus, as scholars we can meet student desires for employability and professional skills; engage students critically with issues of direct, immediate impact; and meet our university and program requirements.

Moreover, our work as activist scholars with various organizations, both on- and off-campus, can also contribute to our research and publishing requirements. I can say that the struggles in the neoliberal university have helped me to realize my own potential as a media professional (again), working with various social justice organizations; as a professional scholar, with a growing list of publications (including a co-authored book on media activism in process); and as an activist scholar, engaged in contributing to progressive social change and reclaiming the public university in the public interest.

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Notes
1. Thus, this definition of “activism” provides a stark contrast between that of academics engaged in critical pedagogy in the classroom with that of senior administrators in the bureaucracy securing more control over academic governance and reaping greater financial rewards for themselves. See the analysis of the huge increase in senior administrators’ incomes at Ontario universities from 1996 to 2006 by two economists (including a former vice-president academic at Wilfrid Laurier University) (Essaji & Horton, 2010; see also Potter, 2015; Smith, 2010).

2. The influence of right-wing polemics is not undermined by any lack of a basis in reality. See Larry Patriquin (2004) for an example of how the National Post attempted to “invent tax rage.”

3. Please note that my comment here is pointing to attempts to have fewer professors with larger classes employing instructional, rather than teaching, assistants, which means professors having to lower the academic standards (and expectations) in assignments if less qualified instructors are being hired to grade them. This process is not the same as paying contract faculty poverty wages. Many, if not most, of the contract faculty I have met over the past 15 years at WLU are not only well qualified, but also often have more experience in teaching (more) students than tenure-track faculty.

4. During the 1990s, a common thread in discussion with many of my colleagues in academia in the U.K. was that teaching quality and research assessment exercises were “busy-work” to keep us from using our spare time to participate in social justice struggles.

5. Michele Kramer and Sue Ferguson (2016) cite Ken Snowdon’s report for the Canadian Association of University Business Officers, which “clearly shows that the lion’s share of university spending since
2001 has been dedicated to buildings and interest payments.” Kramer and Ferguson highlight WLUFA’s comparative analysis between WLU’s (much publicized) budgets and audited financial statements over 10 years, which shows that money for operations was spent on capital and related costs, and senior administrators made frequent cuts to education despite a decade of surpluses.

6. My source here is personal communication with several former students from my graduate course, who are employed as communication professionals in corporate and non-profit organizations; two even said they draw upon the course as a resource every day.

7. The phrase “resources of hope” is the title of a posthumous collection of Raymond Williams’ essays published in 1989, although it originates as the title for the final chapter in his 1983 work, Towards 2000, “Resources for a Journey of Hope” (pp. 241–269).

References


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