Interview

Activism and Communication Pedagogy: 
A Conversation with Becky Lentz and Mark Lipton

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Introduction
At the Activism and Communication Scholarship in Canada workshop, two of the presenters—Mark Lipton and Becky Lentz—offered participants insight into their pedagogical practices that aim to critically incorporate theory and practice. Mark and Becky are dedicated and creative educators, working to advance social change in both their classrooms and their respective communities. Mark is an Associate Professor in the School of English and Theatre Studies at the University of Guelph and also teaches in the Media Studies program at the University of Guelph-Humber. An ardent media literacy advocate, he teaches courses that focus on media and communication, digital literacy and pedagogy, performance studies, and research methods. An Associate Professor of Communication Studies at McGill University, Becky’s pedagogical and research interests focus on critical policy studies, discourse and genre theory, and civil society participation in policy change processes, including the role of philanthropy.

Drawing on Mark and Becky’s reflective comments, participants at the workshop discussed the struggles and rewards associated with their own communication-oriented pedagogical practices as teaching assistants, lecturers, and full-time faculty members. In the formal and informal discussions that took place throughout the day, many noted that there seems to be an expectation that communication pedagogy—particularly in the Canadian context—should be concerned with social justice in some manner. At the same time, a few expressed feeling the need to defend the value of their experiential learning activities with some of their peers, demonstrating that critical theory can both inform and be informed by this type of “real life” education.

Conversations thus revolved around how best to marry theory and practice, and how this marriage can or should be related to activism, advocacy, and public intellectualism. Workshop participants also recognized that Canadian communication scholars experience diverse institutional opportunities and obstacles in terms of how much
freedom they have to engage in activist-oriented pedagogy both inside and beyond the classroom. These can either support or hinder the type and extent of their activist praxis and may also be contingent on job security.

In addition to potential institutional limits placed on pedagogical practices, participants noted a range of other challenges associated with activist-oriented pedagogical work, including the time and effort required to facilitate meaningful “hands-on” experiences. They also mentioned potential safety issues (depending on the type of activity); the difficulty of fostering interest in social justice issues for some members of their classes; the need to balance their own views on how best to advance social change with those of their students, as they may not align; the challenge in encouraging students to care about policy issues (which, as Mary Elizabeth (M.E.) Luka and Catherine Middleton demonstrate in this issue of the Canadian Journal of Communication, are of critical importance to our field); the capacity to teach and facilitate the use of different skill sets (e.g., writing briefs, media production); and striking a balance between inspiring students to believe they can have an impact and recognizing the time and labour required to make a discernable difference.

Numerous participants lamented the dearth of literature on these issues, as well as the absence of forums to provide support and to share challenges, successes, and advice with fellow communication scholars. In recognition of Mark and Becky’s interest and expertise in this area, we asked if we could interview them for this special issue. What follows are excerpts from those interviews, grouped into six key themes, which highlight some of the key issues mentioned above. Sandra Smeltzer (SS) interviewed Mark (ML) in person and via email (November, 2015, and September, 2016); Leslie Regan Shade (LRS) interviewed Becky (BL) on two separate occasions via phone (January and February, 2016).

**Interviews**

**Theme 1: What is “activism” and how does it relate to pedagogy?**

**LRS:** What role do you think communication scholars can or should play on- and/or off-campus in terms of activism? What do you see as the relationship between activism and pedagogy?

**BL:** I don’t necessarily use the term activism because there are so many different ways one can be active and engaged in social change ... What I’ve chosen to do is use my classroom as a laboratory for educating students about activism, either as a way for them to understand what other actors are doing, or for them to become actors themselves.

I think it depends on the type of scholarship the scholar is doing. I don’t feel I necessarily have a normative stance on what other scholars should be doing with their time, but I can tell you that there are many ways to engage in what I would call social change work. I think that for most of the scholars in research intensive institutions like mine, the kind of engagement that is often practiced is public intellectualism: being an expert on an issue, being invited to, or inserting oneself into, or working alongside, say, a group whose issues you support. In other words, you’re not necessarily taking on any new work, rather you’re asked to share your views publicly on an issue.
On campus the kinds of roles scholars play depend on the degree of curricular freedom they have. For example, the ways in which one uses coursework inside established degree programs (not necessarily electives, but required courses) matters. Creating new courses that are part of program requirements is one way to embed pedagogy that supports scholars’ and students’ engagement in public issues. Scholars also take another route: submitting Op-Eds, doing public talks, participating in public events. These forms of participation, however, tend to place the gaze on a scholar’s research expertise, which gives that scholar a voice in a particular public debate.

Off campus, there are also so many different ways to get involved. You can become an ally with a particular community group, a non-profit organization, or collective, like the World Social Forum, or a local community radio station ... you can play a role as a member of a board, or you can actually use your classes as research labs for work groups themselves can't afford to take on. I'd like to emphasize that embedding the work I'm doing into teaching is something I've chosen to do given the kind of institution I work in and the kind of public engagement I want to do.

The context within which the scholar is doing the teaching and research, and the way in which the institution merits or rewards civic engagement is critical to how scholars decide to engage in communication activism ... Adding to the idea of institutional context, the status of the scholar—whether the person is tenured or untenured—is also critical to what choices that scholar makes. And also the labour that the scholar is willing to expend outside the demands of research, teaching, and service is another factor. That's why it's difficult to say “should.” Some people have family demands, some have ailing parents, partners, or friends. The context of that person's time availability determines what level of activism or advocacy they decide to take on.

SS: How important is this topic of activism and pedagogy to you?

ML: I was very excited to participate in this [the workshop and the interview for the special issue of the Canadian Journal of Communication] ... It was the first time there was anything that connected communications, pedagogy, and activism ... And I felt like someone was talking to me. This is what I care about. This is what I do. This is my passion. And finally, there's an opportunity to meet other people who have similar passions—shared passions—and to learn what other people do.

I consider pedagogical acts as forms of activism; when I consider the goals of a particular class activity or assignment and look at the bigger picture, I am enacting my social justice identity and experiences both in and on the classroom environment. Teaching about and through activism is a kind of meta-cognitive work that is especially relevant to today’s young adults. I say this because I think many of my students are comfortable with the behaviours of activism and, yet, they still require the time and the critical and creative thinking to understand the impact and implication of their behaviour. I see pedagogy as activism because it's my opportunity to try to get students to care—care about something. I like to say that one of my chief goals in any course is to help students see the world from multiple points of view. Peda-
gologically, this goal is achieved through a number of activities and exercises that seek to provoke, enrage, engage, and/or stimulate critical thinking.

Activism isn’t just standing in the streets; it’s not just filling out an online petition; it’s not just deciding to vote and for whom … I mean, what are the limits of the definition of activism? I began my career, first and foremost, as an activist—not because I wanted to fight for social justice but more because friends were dying. HIV/AIDS radically impacted my understanding of the world and the world’s response to this global epidemic led me down a path; put me on my journey that I can only describe as my life. I think my challenge is to encourage students to identify that thing that drives them, whether it be about one’s health or family, about media policy, about the death of public discourse, or the rise of celebrity culture. If a student can find that thing that they care about so dearly, with so much heart and emotion that it drives them to “act”—well, I think that’s a kind of activism.

I think our field just has to be more open to a larger range of activist exposures—like, this is my expository activism statement, and it’s going to be very different from someone who’s representing an activist organization. In the last decade or so, I have “taken to the streets” far less. Not because I fear getting arrested—those were some good times! But because my regular experiences in the classroom, my enacting pedagogy, that’s a form of activism that satisfies my soul. So somewhere my ideological expressions of activism joined and formed my teacherly identity, and so, pedagogically, I still see myself as an activist, encouraging activism, and pushing for ongoing activity and enactment such that students begin to experience how they can make a difference in this world.

Theme 2: Theory vs. practice: A false dichotomy?

SS: There seems to be a separation sometimes between—and you’re an exception to this—people who theorize about media and people who can actually do it … That’s why you’re so interesting, because you are bringing the technology into the classroom. But is that a problem for our field, do you think?

ML: I think it’s a challenge for our field. I think the CCA [Canadian Communication Association], for example, could really use a tinkering workshop, where all of us touch stuff and are invited to fail. In fact, we all need more failure in our lives. Experimentation and play with the “stuff” we are theorizing about can really help frame the conversation in new ways. We could all use a coding workshop where we don’t code anything, but we all pull back the screen to reveal the zeros and ones and whatever the code is behind, just so that we can see some of that. I remember coding in DOS [disk operating system], and today’s code is so sophisticated, it just blows my mind thinking about the degree of divides created by the thinkers versus the makers. So yes! I think this is that big of a challenge in the twenty-first century.

Often in the classroom, I don’t get to experience the new toys or experimentation in these important ways because my job is to facilitate learning—be somewhere in the middle. By this, I mean that in the classroom I will not reveal my technological skill. I want students to fail, play with it, get messy, and then report back. I am not a teacher because I want students to reproduce my knowledge. I’m encouraging
students to figure out for themselves whether they prefer theory or practice; writing or speaking; team or individual work. The dichotomies in the world of postsecondary education seem endless. Like most dichotomies, however, most of them are false. The academy may favour certain kinds of discursive works, though this is starting to change. In Ontario, the divide between the universities and the colleges was created from this very assumptive belief about this divide between theory and practice. But of course, we know, this is breaking down in multiple ways, just as traditional disciplines are beginning to expand and release, like breath, keeping up with the changing values, skills, and knowledge of its members.

We are still near the beginning of the twenty-first century, but I think in the decades ahead, this particular dichotomy will fall away. Teaching, by the way, is not for those who cannot practice or live in the world of work. I'm thinking of the old proverb, “those who can, do; those who can't, teach.” Today, this dichotomy, in part based on the divide between theory and practice, seems laughable. It may pluck at the insecurity strings of young teachers, but I don't believe any teacher worth their salt would accept this dichotomy in the ways it is intended. Today's students, who are significantly different from, say, a generation ago, demand that teachers and classrooms respond to our changing technological society and facilitate the marriage between theory and practice.

**BL:** I think there's a perception in highly theoretical academic departments that when one gets to the practice stuff, we necessarily sacrifice theory, which is not the case. Working with *practice* theory is an entry point in teaching that encourages students to become producers—not just consumers—of knowledge by, for example, studying or working with people doing media justice work, which takes a very clear philosophical orientation toward structural change. A focus on practice demands that students apply their knowledge about feminist epistemology or critical race theory to their own research on case studies of interventions in media and communication-related activities. In this approach, theoretical knowledge becomes useful not just for critique but also for intervention in public affairs.

This approach privileges “So what now?” Adding “And what now” to each syllabus for me is to combine activism and pedagogy.

**Theme 3: Empowering students**

**SS:** Tell me a bit more about how you encourage students to “tune in” and to recognize that they can make a difference?

**ML:** I begin the first day of a lecture with 200 students by making everyone stand against the wall, hold hands, and engage in an activity of selective attention for one minute—for one minute we stand in silence focusing on our breath. Because attention is a learned behaviour, and you actually can get good at it. If I'm going to be teaching about media and allowing students to have their devices, they also have to learn to focus their attention. And a lot of what I teach about is media determinist approaches, like media relativism or linguistic relativism—the relationship between language, thought, and action. I'm always trying to draw connections between the words that you use, the thoughts that you have, and the actions that follow. So
teaching about activism, I'm very careful with my language, because I want to inspire their thinking and their behaviour, and I want them to walk away with a shared vocabulary, because I think that shared language, whatever that might be, may work to inspire thinking or inspire action.

I believe in problem-based learning and like to provide students with a number of case studies or scenarios; before I reveal any outcomes or processes I always work from the student point-of-view asking, “what would you do?” To initiate this experience in the classroom I suggest students stop taking notes. They can doodle. But it's unnecessary to capture everything I might say in writing. Writing leads students to follow my argument, I want them to participate in my arguments.

I am teaching in the vein of Plato's *Phaedrus* (1973), retelling Socrates’ story between the Egyptian King Thamus and the God Theuth. Theuth, the inventor of writing describes “a sure receipt for memory and wisdom” (p. 96). The King, in response, insists that an inventor of an art is not the best judge of the good or harm that will result from its use. The King, in fact, argues against writing, suggesting how it leads people to have the reputation for knowledge without the reality, all the while relying on writing as a tool for recollection, for a people who have grown forgetful. Before students fall asleep from any more ancient philosophy, I introduce the “media ecological approach” to understanding technological change. I invite all students to take on the identity of King Thamus and consider some of the unintended consequences of everyday technologies. “The automobile caused highway accidents, and required asphalt, and led to the creation of the suburbs. . . .” Students seem to like considering their cars.

Media ecology is the perspective that frames my entire approach to Media Studies and I try to introduce this systems-based approach in all of my teaching. It's a way to assess problems that inspire students to respond from a variety of angles. It’s a compassionate approach. In fact, this helps display my authentic sense of caring for and about students. Begin by caring about your students, and they will tune in. Caring, even a little, gets you pretty far.

**BL:** I draw on various types of grey literature and academic literature and say . . . “let’s take the civil society perspective and understand what actors are doing day in and day out, and what theoretical and practical knowledge do they draw upon in the work that they do?” I found that genre-based pedagogy contributes to building an activist or advocacy sensibility in students. Students can then imagine a world for themselves as part of a citizen or consumer group or a think tank . . . or they may imagine themselves being in a law firm working on public interest issues. Many have decided to go into Masters work in communications and media . . . Teaching from the perspective of civil society and consumer and citizen perspectives gives them a sense that there might be a future for them in some way in this field.

If the only thing we produce is scholars constantly rendering the problem, which is quite overwhelming, then it is hard to imagine how students will find a way into this; for example, the crisis of capitalism—how does one begin working on this? What’s the entry point? Critique is one type of activism, but beyond that, what
are we suggesting for students who then begin to care? How should they take their energies forward?

When I've asked students to produce an Op-Ed at the end of a course, which they also have to pitch to a real news outlet, the results have been inspiring. While several have succeeded in getting their Op-Eds published, the larger learning outcome is that they report that they experienced caring about the writing they were doing because there was something at stake for them. There was a “real” audience that they report they don’t experience when writing term papers. In writing an Op-Ed, they report the excitement that comes from taking an informed stand on an issue.

The bottom line is that I want them to understand how knowledge creation works—that it’s never neutral, and that they have a right to become knowledge producers, creators, and critics themselves.

**Theme 4: High- and low-tech skills needed for activism**

**BL:** What I’ve learned is that if one wants to engage in community organizing, one needs to engage in the actual work that organizers do, and that that work relies on a set of genres that gets drawn upon routinely. There is a set of things one learns how to do: toolkits, manifestos, charters of different kinds … when I engage students in researching genres of participation, they become more aware of the community of practice that draws on these genres because knowing how to produce a charter means being in a community with others working on the same objective. What’s the rhetorical purpose of the charter? How does it work in the processes of social change?

I also use policy briefs and policy memos in my teaching as a way to familiarize students with other communities of practice that participate directly in policy change processes. In order to do a policy brief they have to digest down what would normally be a 30-page paper into 3,000 words. Students report satisfaction in writing these briefs because they begin to realize the work involved in intervening in public debates. In short, their writing “matters” to someone other than their professor.

**ML:** I began doing all of this … with what I call low-res technology, like how do you make your own paper—let's have a paper-making workshop. I think many communication scholars know how paper is made, because they study the history of communications. If you just ask … you think of papyrus, and you turn it into a mash, and you dry it, right? Well these students came up with all kinds of ideas about how to make paper … it was the kind of assignment like, “how do you make a peanut butter sandwich?” You have to teach me how to make it first. So the object wasn’t to make paper. The object was to make paper so that you know how to teach it to someone else. That’s one of the methods that I employ when I’m using any technology. And really in the last five years—and it’s only been in the last five years—when everyone comes to class with a laptop and a smartphone—I say use what you know, use what you like.

My students consider multiple tools and techniques of activism. I love sharing the YES MEN and their media hoaxes, like their fake *New York Times*, by simulating a real form, they stimulated a great deal of awareness and discourse, and their initiatives often lead to reactions and further measures and steps among citizens and pol-
icy makers. The YES MEN use any number of high- and low-res methods, from costumes and acting, to Web and systems design.

In my first-year lecture, I select a case study and assign students the real names of all involved parties. So I ask students to role play, as a corporate official, activist, community member, First Nations leader, and elected member of government. Then, in class, students enact their powers—by forming coalitions, by writing clear and well-researched public statements, and by talking to each other—to influence government policy makers to vote a particular way on this case. It is fascinating to watch students participate. Many want the role of an activist but often, the corporation unleashes tactics that overcome the situation. Role playing is really a very valuable and under-rated pedagogical activity.

Ultimately, I assess students' meta-cognitive reflections of this work, not the work itself. This way, my students have the freedom to experiment, to play, and to fail. I think this process also inspires many students to want to improve their digital and information literacies and competencies. It's amazing for me to witness students learn to access current library journals as research to document and support their point of view. In a role during a simulation where social justices are challenged, many students care enough to use advanced library resources. There's really no point in teaching advanced digital competencies to an audience that isn't interested. So I often begin from this point, and seek to inspire action to enhance learning. Then students are shifting from low to high on their own, and on their terms—which I think is really important.

Theme 5: Media policy education and media literacy

ML: All the work that I've done in the last 25 years has been about media literacy, and media literacy practices, which includes things like digital storytelling. I am trying to encourage and ask the questions, “what are those digital fluencies or digital competencies?” The last book I wrote, called Research, Write, Create (Gibson & Lipton, 2014) is basically a call for students to engage in communication acts as students—and not just students of media, but all students really—and to resist the academic folly of the power of writing and respond by creating ... to make things, don't just write things. Students certainly have to write, and may need to write, but they can also create something to go with their words. And so in that vein, I've chosen the medium of video because I've worked with video. I invite my students to make short digital essays and I'm interested in studying young adults and their digital literacy via the creation of digital stories. In this phase of my life and through this practice, I'm trying to walk the walk. I've been saying faculty have to require more than just essays, and so, my students are going to create digital stories.

I've been working with high school English and media teachers to design curriculum in this regard. It is still in its very early stages, but the teachers I work with are keen to integrate creative uses of media into their classroom practices and to help me design rubrics and assessment strategies for digital literacy. I've started a repository where this work can be housed, and I aim to assess this work against a rubric I'm designing that will help direct the differences between a digital skill and digital competency. There are a lot of check sheets at the moment. Of course the
concern for many teachers comes to questions about and issues relating to privacy. It’s au courant, if not l’actualité in today’s media environment to raise privacy concerns. And what do I know about privacy? In fact, I was stumped. As an educator and activist, I had no idea what to say to these teachers about media literacy and privacy. So my research was stalled for a little while as I tried to figure out an answer. To this end, I discovered some Canadian communication scholars with whom I wanted to collaborate because of their knowledge about privacy.

Today, I help run a new Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council-sponsored program of research called PrivacyStories. My partners, Rozita Dara, Judith Nicholson, Leslie Regan Shade, Kenneth Werbin, and I want to encourage young adults to create digital stories about their conceptions of privacy. We have only just started and already I’ve learned so much. Here is a fantastic example of why (and how) media literacy researchers need to integrate issues of digital and media policy into the discussion. Media literacy goes nowhere if it fails to acknowledge the media policies that legislate, regulate, mediate, and control its subjects. This question of privacy has opened my eyes so clearly; media policy education is media literacy. It’s about time we all get on the same page.

LRS: How should communication studies embrace media policy education? ... What do you mean by media policy education? How have you applied this in the classroom? And what have been the responses from students?

BL: In any school of mass communications where there’s some kind of industry studies education, whether for professional, advertising studies, public relations, journalism, broadcasting (and very rarely do you see telecom in there in any of those mixes) … it would seem pertinent to include which industries are regulated (and why) and which are not. I think it’s irresponsible not to require some media governance or technology governance module in any program that teaches students about media industries, whether it’s the technology industries, broadcasting industries, the software industries—again what would be the policy component in software industries—it would be trademark, patent, copyrights … I think it’s essential … you would never teach a journalism course without ethics, so why would any media industries course not include ethics as well?

Theme 6: Neoliberalism and higher education

SS: Given the increasingly neoliberal university, have you had anybody kind of challenge how you approach your pedagogy, or do you feel any pressure to … change your format to something that’s … easier, conventional, whatever you want to call it. Or am I imposing that?

ML: No you’re definitely not imposing that. There are pressures. There are obstacles. But with obstacles come opportunities. Every day there’s something that’s come up that’s an impact of the neoliberal trend. So rising class sizes, for example, make what I do more difficult—not impossible, just more difficult. Here’s my latest challenge: I’m used to teaching 60–80 students in a room with movable chairs. My institution has now bolted everything to the floor and expanded those room capacities to 120,
so basically you're in this big room and everyone's in long rows where they can't move tables.

**SS:** That really encourages the banking model of lecturing to everybody else—the mute audience.

**ML:** I'm dumbfounded by this choice. It is a classic neoliberal choice. I'm supposed to live with these classrooms and I can't. The corporate takeover of our culture is so difficult to live with, as a liberal academic. I want to fight like hell to preserve those elements of the academic world that I hold precious. I don't think I'm alone in this, but there are so many barriers and obstacles. It makes work and life extraordinarily exhausting.

But like all people, you know, you've got to choose your battles, and this is a battle I've chosen lately. As I proceed, I also am super-mindful of the precarious employees I work with—there are so many of them. Another neoliberal trend. This might be my personal battle, but at what cost to others? So, it's risky. Being an activist is always risky.

**References**
