Women and Allies in Action: College Students as 'Diversity Workers' in the Activism Classroom

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ABSTRACT   Research on feminist pedagogy has analyzed activism-based teaching practices in introductory courses and special topics courses in Women's and Gender Studies (WGS). Few studies have focused on courses that entirely center on feminist activism and have students implement weeks-long activism projects. In this article, I investigate how we can transfer an activist consciousness to our students, some of whom might not consider themselves feminists, might not have thought of themselves as activists, have not participated in any form of activism, or might be taking a WGS course only for general education or diversity credit. Using data collected in my "Women and Allies in Action" class via surveys, interviews, and analysis of students' reflective writing, I assess which challenges hold students back and what motivates them to create and implement complex, creative, and sustainable feminist activism projects.

KEYWORDS   Feminist activism, feminist pedagogy, experiential learning

Some have argued that Women's and Gender Studies (WGS) as an academic discipline has lost its connection to the activist movements out of which it emerged, and that the focus on community engagement and social change needs to be re-introduced into the WGS classroom to counteract academia's exclusivity (Messer-Davidow, 2002). I concur that it is not enough to raise students' consciousness in the WGS classroom; students need to learn how to implement that consciousness through meaningful action, based on a more substantive foundation than charity and volunteerism (Bubriski & Semaan, 2009). To grow our understanding of how to facilitate such active engagements, I investigate the similarities I see between my students and academic diversity workers who, as Ahmed (2017) demonstrates, consistently "come up against brick walls" (p. 91). Considering Ahmed's (2015) claim that "it is often students who are leading discussions of 'difficult issues' on campus," my comparison digs into the context in which my students plan and execute projects and their hesitancies about feminist activisms.

WGST 310 "Women and Allies in Action," which is the foundation for this article, is designed as a semester-long class in which students learn about what activism is, what makes activism feminist, and how to design and implement intersectional and sustainable activism projects on their own, either benefiting our campus or the wider community. The setting of my course is a public comprehensive liberal arts university in the South of the U.S. with roughly 10,000 students—half in-state students and half out-of-state primarily from the

Northeast. In WGST 310, students study the history of feminist activism as well as current examples; they interview someone they consider to be an activist for their midterm project; and, for the latter half of the semester, students work on activist group projects of their own design. Groups form based on interest in topics that students suggest. They can collaborate with community organizations, but they may not simply volunteer their time—they need to implement a project. Each group member completes at least 15 hours of work and keeps a journal to emphasize the importance of personal assessment in effective activism. Lastly, each group writes a collaborative reflection paper. The course has no pre-requisites and fulfills a general education requirement, which attracts lower- and upper-level students as well as a majority of non-WGS majors and minors.

Students, over the years, have implemented impressive projects, presenting on sexist dress codes for a local accounting firm, preparing a well-researched report for our director of Student Health about the need for more women wellness hours on campus, and writing a chosen name policy for our school, which was shared in a meeting with the provost, registrar, dean of students, and a number of vice-presidents. Yet, most often, students opt for basic forms of activism, like tabling in the student union, distributing a flyer, or creating an Instagram feed. By no means do I want to discredit the impact these projects might have. In fact, a red thread throughout the semester is the claim that everyday acts can constitute activism. But does it take four students spending 15 hours each over the course of 10 weeks to design and hang up flyers? Where do students draw inspiration for their projects and what limits them in dreaming big?

In this article, I investigate the factors which influence student motivation to create and implement substantial, creative, and sustainable feminist activism. In doing so, I am conscious of neoliberal institutional tendencies to blame students, rendering them a problem "when what they want is not in accordance with what academics want or what academics want them to want" (Ahmed, 2015). In contrast to this accusatory attitude, I discuss the conditions under which my students perform their academic work and stand in solidarity with them and the communities they hope to support. Following a short literature review and a methodology section, I offer detailed descriptions of my students' projects and present collected data that speak to patterns in my students' attitudes toward their activism projects. I then analyze said patterns through the lens of Ahmed's theorizing on "diversity work" to help instructors better prepare their students for meaningful engagement with feminist activism.

Why Activism?

The historical connection between activism and teaching WGS as activism as well as WGS' intention to connect theory with praxis have been well-documented (Naples, 2002). Acknowledging that "changes in social relations, including the nature of the women's movement and feminist politics, have dramatically affected this [supposed natural] relationship between academics and activism" (Zimmerman, 2002, p. 186) as well as the "endless elasticity of [the term activism] that nevertheless serves for so many in WGS as that which the field has and should continue to embrace as its *raison d'être*" (Orr, 2012, p. 88, emphasis in original), I examine here how we can encourage an activist consciousness in our students, some of whom

do not consider themselves feminists, have not thought of themselves as activists or participated in activism, or might be taking a WGS course for general education or diversity credit.

A wide range of scholarship exists on service learning, internships, and other forms of experiential learning in connection with feminist pedagogy (Seethaler, 2016; Tice, 2002). Many articles investigate how to incorporate activism techniques into classes, how to design classes on a type of activism, or how to employ activism assignments in Introduction to Women's (and Gender) Studies courses (see Dean et al., 2019). Peet and Reed (2002) stress how activism provides students with the "opportunity to experience themselves and others as conscious social actors who are able to influence social and political structures" (p. 107), which "increases their confidence and skills, . . . helps to reshape their assumptions about what is appropriate, possible and necessary" (p. 112), and "enhance[s their] self-efficacy" (p. 115).

I am indebted to Arnold (2014), who notes eloquently that activism: 1) targets the source of some social problem rather than mitigating its consequences after-the-fact; 2) is oriented to long-term change rather than solely meeting immediate needs; 3) is intended to have an impact beyond those immediately involved; 4) should challenge the existing structures of power and decision-making; 5) engenders a critical consciousness, on the part of those affected, among the general public, or both; and 6) contributes to building social movements for justice by making connections across all identity markers.[1] In class, I relied on Arnold's definition to broaden students' initially narrow conceptualizations of what might constitute activism. In a pre-survey I administered on the first day of class, most students' descriptions can be summarized by this particular quote, "taking action to change what you feel needs to be changed in society." When asked to name examples of activism, 16 of 18 participants mentioned marches, protests, or rallies. Of the other two, the first one listed the Black Lives Matter Movement as well as the Women's Movement, and the second referenced Martin Luther King, Jr. and Ghandi. While calling senators, reading literature, collecting money, founding an organization, and raising awareness each received one mention, the answers indicate that, at the beginning of the semester, most students thought of activism as happening on a large scale, involving masses of people.

I challenged students to question this narrow, grandiose definition of activism, but we also collectively cautioned against an "anything counts as activism" approach. We discussed how activism needs political consciousness, a clear intention, a realistic plan, an identifiable constituency, and an acknowledgement of injustice, and how it must go further than ranting, volunteering, or charity, with the goal of restructuring society. As Baumgardner and Richards (2005) put it in *Grassroots*, one of our textbooks, activism is "consistently expressing one's values with the goal of making the world more just" (p. xix) since "everyone has the power to impact the world" (p. xviii). The midterm assignment to interview someone students perceive as an activist is designed to drive home these claims and raise students' confidence in their own activism in the second half of the semester.

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1 Arnold has not yet published on her insightful conceptualization of activism.

Methodological Context

Before starting the fall 2018 semester, I received Institutional Review Board approval for each element of my study. In addition, I informed my students about their work's role in my research and assured them that they would remain completely anonymous. I administered an in-class pre-survey with 18 students on the first day of the semester about their past experiences with and perceptions of activism. Nine students took a modified post-survey that included questions about the course on the last meeting of the semester. The survey asked participants to define and list examples of activism, whether they consider themselves activists, if they had participated in activism before taking the class, and, lastly, what makes an activism project effective and sustainable. I also analyzed all students' reflective journals, which they had to update weekly. The journals added up to 296 individual entries, ranging in length from a sentence to multiple paragraphs. I further looked at eight group reflection papers of around twelve pages each in which students assessed their work process and project outcomes, when I taught the course in fall 2017 and 2018. Via these artefacts, I gained insights into participating groups' planning and implementation processes, as well as their comfort and struggles with projects. Finally, I invited all students to join me individually for approximately thirty-minute long, semi-structured interviews building on the pre- and post-surveys as well as their reflective writing. Two students volunteered to share thoughts on their work in this manner. Qualitative data analysis software helped me sort through all the collected data and establish the following patterns in students' thinking about their activism.

Structural Pressures on Students

The eight activism projects I analyze here include four groups tabling on campus to raise awareness about an issue (with one of the groups having people sign postcards for state politicians), a group handing out goody-bags to people experiencing homelessness, another creating a sticker for trashcans to encourage recycling, a team creating a promotional video for our campus food pantry, and the last one using social media to share information about women in the arts. All groups, initially, had more intricate plans for pursuing their activism than they were able to actualize.

My pre-survey shows that 50% (n=9) of students had participated in activism before class. 16.6% (n=3) of students strongly agreed that they considered themselves activists, 50% (n=9) agreed, 27.8% (n=5) disagreed, and 5.6% (n=1) strongly disagreed. The post-survey, on the last day of the semester, displays slightly shifted numbers. Out of nine students, 22.2% (n=2) strongly agreed that they consider themselves activists, 66.7% (n=6) agreed, and 11.1% (n=1) disagreed. While the survey suggests that more students became more comfortable with the term "activist," we did not see a huge change in levels of self-identification.

Some days—when few students attend a social justice gathering, or our feminist student organization lacks help to implement an event—it is hard not to consider our students apathetic to social change. But, of course, that myopic vision does not take into consideration students' commitments to families, friends, work (often full-time) to pay for college, and their other passions, all of which compete with their classes and studying. What I usually see in "Women

and Allies in Action" classes counters this perception of a lack of student engagement. Most students are excited to work for change, which is why they chose my course. In the pre-survey, when asked why they considered themselves an activist, students' responses included "I have strong beliefs regarding equality and I tend to voice them" and "I'm still in the beginning stages of activism. . . I'll protest with people, but I haven't found the strength to do my own form of activism." While some students enter class as fully-fledged activists, others are still hesitant about their capabilities; and yet others acknowledge that activism has been a distant thought, but that they are open-minded about it, like the student who wrote, "I guess if it meant a lot to me I would want to fight for a change!"

Personal transformations during project implementation were often striking. G., who distributed stickers on trash cans to get more people to recycle on campus, noted in her journal: "I've never . . . been a part of an activism project, so this was very eye-opening. We helped even though it was something small. This truly inspired me to want to engage in more projects . . . in hopes to make an even bigger difference for our world!" J., whose group handed out goody-bags to folx experiencing homelessness, mentioned that "nothing could have prepared us for how truly emotional this experience would be." J.'s group reflected in their paper that this "project taught us that we need to be more involved in the community and be more proactive about making changes that will have a lasting impact." Group 1, who tabled about sexual violence on college campuses, declared that their assignment "lit a small fire for activism in each one of us and helped us each get out of our comfort zones." Clearly, the work they undertook together impacted some students in positive ways, making visible for them the influence they can have in effecting change.

Accompanying their affirmative feedback, students were also frank about the challenges they faced in pursuing activism. In addition to ubiquitous apprehension about group work, which students indicated had lowered their ambitions, problems with effective time management was the most common rationale for students' limited activism agendas. Many of our students work full-time while also being enrolled full-time in classes. The difficulty with planning and executing might suggest a lack of belief in the impact activism that is not perfectly executed can have, causing a decrease in dedication to the task. When asked in the pre-survey about what students think makes an effective activism project, the most frequent answer was passion, followed by organization, a clear goal, and being intersectional in one's approaches.

My interviews with two students in group 2 (trans deaths awareness) revealed that both students were very satisfied with their project. When questioned about their planning process, each student expressed some regret over not having done anything "bigger;" for example, one interviewee suggested that it would have been more effective to drive to the state capital and bring their message directly to lawmakers. But each student was clear that these were "ideal" plans, which were simply not feasible. While the students demonstrated genuine excitement about their projects, they felt hindered in their implementation processes by their academic workloads and non-academic work schedules. As a result, working in groups was cited as both an advantage—as it allowed for a division of tasks—and one of the biggest disadvantages—as true team work outside of class time was deemed virtually impossible.

Other groups reiterated the same concerns: Group 1 initially wanted to bring an art exhibit about sexual assault to campus, but, as D. explained in her journal, they had "to change the activism part of the project due to time constraints." The group ended up tabling and encouraging peers to use an app to contact their representatives about proposed changes to Title IX under the Trump administration that limited the definition of sexual assault and gave more rights to assumed perpetrators. In their paper, the members mentioned that they had "considered getting some of the groups that are already on campus to partner with us, but time did not permit us to get all of them together." In the end, they did not collaborate with any other groups and had about 20 people visit their table.

Group 4 had planned an interactive tabling event about women's contributions to the arts, including stickers and buttons, "so that people in attendance could take a physical reminder of something from the experience and promote conversation by walking through campus." But the "group spent a lot of time organizing and preparing—so much that [they] ended up running out of time to execute the original plan," and instead created a social media site with images "to empower the followers who find interest in them and inform those who do not usually find [the topic] interesting." According to them, "it was a little more convenient having the activism on social media because people tend to find time to check their social media pages even on the go," but they did not offer data on how many people visited their site.

Most reflections presented time issues as an inevitable circumstance. Despite the call for self-assessment, no group brought forward a critical evaluation regarding different approaches to planning, scheduling, or organizing. Tackling this lack of concrete answers, I venture to deduce from some of their comments and behavior that engaging in activism required students to exert a larger amount of emotional labor than their usual graded assignments in college. The social weight of the topics they had chosen, high self-expectations to effect tangible change, as well as the knowledge that people invested in diversity, equity, and inclusion are rarely received with open arms, all made activism seem like a daunting endeavor. Concerns about pushback rooted in racism, (cis)sexism, and classism partially paralyzed some students' efforts; their own precarities also rendered them hesitant to become publicly vulnerable. As Johnson (2018) has helpfully assessed, engaging in a praxis-focused class can create more stress for students, because any kind of outside-of-scheduled-class projects might, among others, affect their work schedules, create costs for additional driving to and from campus, and complicate any kind of unpaid labor—such as care responsibilities—students are engaged in. Johnson and Luhmann (2015/16) add that the confounding and conflicting neoliberal rhetorics pervading higher education pressure students not to get too invested in classes that supposedly do not contain "skills training for . . . so-called 'real world'" jobs to which they may aspire (p. 54). I intend for these insights to demonstrate that students are not to be blamed on an individual level for their projects' perceived shortcomings, but that structural issues shaping the lives of current college students exert a significant impact on their abilities to engage in feminist experiential learning.

Baumgardner and Richards (2005) emphasize college students' power due to their numbers and because their tuition funds most institutions of higher education, so they encourage students to "not [be] afraid of power," specifically administrators (p. 73). While students did

not particularly worry about censorship from higher-ups—likely because none of their small-scale events would trigger the attention of the administration—two groups were worried about their audience's possible reactions. D., who sat at the table with information about sexual violence, remarks that she "was very worried with what some of them were going to say to us." In our conservative region and on a campus that hosts a Turning Point USA student chapter,[2] any discussion of sexual violence has the potential to be met with misogynistic rhetoric. Luckily, the group did not experience any controversy, but their decision to lower the scope of their activism in an effort to avoid distressing encounters is noteworthy.

One of B.'s first journal entries about her work on a tabling event to raise awareness about violent deaths in the trans community emphasized the importance the group put on the need for all "to feel comfortable with the ideas." Two of B.'s (who is white) Black peers' comments explain further this necessity for addressing audience comfort in planning. First, A. says that they "were afraid that this would get backlash, because of all the counter movements to Black Lives Matter," since they had decided to call their project "Trans Lives Matter." Beyond explaining that their slogan was intentionally trying to catch the interest of people who might be skeptical of the "Black Lives Matter" movement, the group did not dig further into issues of appropriation—despite being prompted to do so. While none of the white team members made an explicit reference to overt criticism, F., the only other Black student in the group, "[p]repar[ed] [her]self for any type of push back that we would possibly receive from people on the day that we did our activism component." The racial implications with regard to the ability to consider oneself an activist and how others will receive your activism reveal themselves acutely in these reflections. While white students could take their comfort levels into consideration, for students of color, their bodily safety might be at greater risk as their protests have historically been vilified as riots—as epitomized in the difference in reactions toward unarmed Black Lives Matter protests against the shootings of Black men, compared with predominantly white and heavily armed men storming the United States Capitol. While, in many instances, members of the first group were tear-gassed, the latter received wide-spread sympathy to express their right to freedom of speech. Understandably, minoritized students might be more hesitant to engage in any form of overtly attention-seeking activism. I am glad to report that A. and F.'s group was pleased by the positive responses they received while tabling.

Group 2's experiences showcase the extra emotional labor students had to navigate in the transphobic and racist environment that is neoliberal U.S. academia. Whitney (2018) offers astute observations about the impact that laboring with and around others' feelings can create: "the work of managing feeling may or may not be successful at producing dispositions in others, but regardless of its success at that purported goal, it invariably has byproducts in the worker herself—byproducts that may themselves be (at least comparatively) unmanageable" (p. 645). In gearing their activism projects toward their audiences' values, ideologies, and deeply-held belief systems, my students functioned as affective workers whose bodies, according to

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2 Turning Point USA is a conservative organization most well-known for its "Professor Watchlist" that publishes the names and affiliations of university faculty who are accused of "discriminating" against conservative students in their classrooms and on their campuses.

Whitney (2018), are shaped by their efforts as "waste or excess [affect] is part of the after-hours cost of affective labor for the worker" (p. 646). Affective labor creates a special kind of emotional strain and "affective depletion" (Whitney, 2018, p. 647). It is incumbent upon instructors who make activism a part of the classroom to be conscious of students' reasonable nervousness with regard to the emotional labor asked of them and to accommodate it in assignment set-up, preparation techniques, and grading structures.

Anxiety about Complex Strategies
Baumgardner and Richards (2005) caution that college students "need strategies for effective activism, ways to take them beyond their outrage and move them toward solutions," preferably tactics that counteract a "shortage of fresh and relevant ideas—something that will grab students' attention when they have a million things vying for their time" (p. 59). But which strategies do students actually feel comfortable embracing? Despite students defining activism mostly as rallies, marches, and protests at the beginning of the semester, none of my groups has ever taken on an issue via a public and disruptive approach. I noticed that in their group papers, and even less so in their individual journals, students rarely referred to their "activism" but mostly mentioned their "projects," which perhaps insinuates that they were still seeing their activities as a school assignment and less as social change action. This conceptual perception of their work as an assignment might further explain their hesitancy to take on more complex techniques, a theory which contradicts the students' assessment of what makes effective activism in the post-survey. Their answers include reference to their experiences of "making effort to actually change something, not just educating or volunteering" and the "capability to bring about long lasting change." Few of the groups met these criteria. Instead, most groups' evaluative mantra can be captured as, "If it even changes just one person's mind, the project was successful because that's one more person in the world who's now fighting for change as well." The difference in using social change versus getting one person's attention as a tool for assessing the impact (not the validity) of activism is substantial.

Students, as I mentioned, developed fascinating and practicable ideas; but the follow-through often did not resemble them. For example, the group who created recycling stickers mentions in their paper that they "could have sponsored a zero-waste event at a football game and [had] a tent set up that directly shows the process of sorting trash." They did not go into detail with why this idea was not pursued further. F. revealed in a journal entry that the same group also considered creating more recycling locations for plastic bags on campus, but abandoned the idea because it "would be hard to get [the university] on board with such a big task and it would be costly." Group 6 started off with the clear assessment that "[j]ust setting up a table with facts on sexual harassment was the norm for a lot of the movements on campus. We strived to do something a little different." The first word "just" implies that they saw tabling as a minimally effective technique. So they planned on stringing bras across a bridge at the center of our campus as they "thought that it would be very eye-catching." But, alas, they "knew getting [the school] to approve hanging bras across the bridge would be difficult." So they set up a table with some bras strung across it. Lastly, G., who worked on issues with

our food pantry, explained that she and her partner knew from a survey that they had sent out that the prominent location of the pantry was a big issue as it makes students self-conscious about being seen when accessing it. Yet, "being unable to figure a spot it could be moved to made [them] back off from the idea" to push for relocation. None of the groups contacted university officials to inquire about the feasibility of their ideas. It seems that Baumgardner and Richards' (2005) appeal to students' power on campus did not embolden even some of my groups enough to test their influence.

I discern as at least one of the root causes of this resistance to "go big" an issue present in many WGS classes, from which mine are not exempt. As Taylor (2019) delineates, feminist pedagogy can have a tendency to train students in the "rapid-fire inclination to discount, dismiss, judge, distance, and hold in contempt rather than question with the aim to learn more than their observations can reveal" (p. 107). My students, too, often seem comfortable critiquing situations and people's behavior, but they stop short of creating multifaceted and sustainable solutions based on their critique. The present study has sensitized me to the fact that I need to focus much more on problem-solving skills in all of my classes. Instead of feeling empowered by the possibilities, the students I worked with for this research were stifled by their issues' complexity and were unable to distill a concrete element that could be realistically and effectively targeted. K.—whose group had planned not only to give out essentials to homeless individuals, but also to collect their stories and curate them to call on the local legislature to pass ordinances in support of the community—reflected that the "amount of issues I found became a bit overwhelming due to just the large amount of different types of action . . . needed to help the individuals in the situation." H.'s first journal entry on the sexual harassment tabling project echoed K.'s stress: "None of us have any experience with activism, so honestly we don't even know where to start." The inability to decide on a topic in a timely fashion produced discouragement for many team members. L., who was tabling about environmental issues, admitted that she "wasn't feeling very confident about [their] project because of the many setbacks [they] kept experiencing. [When] [they] realized that [their] original plan wasn't going to work[, they] decided on a light and seemingly easier topic." I want to be clear that I am not insinuating that my students are lazy, but the words "light" and "easier" are indicative of the limited choices the students felt they had.

The paper of the group working on homelessness presented telling insights into their thought processes. They acknowledged that while they "could have done a wide array of things, like propose a social policy, implement [their] own event, or even create an organization, [they] instead decided to take the time to put together care packages." I pause to point to the phrase "take the time," as it implies a greater sacrifice than the other approaches. The group continued:

> Our activism derived from the fundraising and poster-board awareness event. We explained the importance of getting involved . . ., whether it be donating, . . ., volunteering . . ., or . . . helping a homeless person out by purchasing food or supplies . . . We also explained that these small actions are more charity than activism.

This statement identifies the group's own project as mainly charity, trapping them in a very common, often more comfortable "volunteer ethos, a philanthropic or charitable viewpoint that ignores the structural reasons to help others" (Bickford & Reynolds, 2002, p. 230). Their self-assessment further reflects a persistent approach to community service as "at best an exercise in observing otherness and at worst a missionary expedition" (Forbes et al., 1999, p. 162), which equates "difference with deficiency" (p. 163). Yet, the group was confident in their success: "The project in its entirety was meaningful because of the difference we made in the community." Of course, students praise their work in a final paper, but the lack of critical self-assessment indicates an over-estimation of their impact and a meeting of rather low expectations of what constitutes effective activism—for reference, the group tabled one day for a couple of hours, raised $40 ($20 of which came from a parent), and interacted with fewer than 10 homeless individuals.

The impact the group saw might have been more personal. According to them, the "experience . . . sparked conversation about how different our lives are from these individuals." Dangerously close to poverty porn—exploitative depictions of poor people for the personal gain of the non-poor portrayer and audience—their activism became about the students not the marginalized community they set out to support. In that context, it is less surprising to hear that they were appalled by one individual's lack of gratefulness: A "negative experience we had during distribution was a man who was less than grateful for the supplies we provided him with and kept asking for other items[, like] a jacket, money [and], a ride to the doughnut shop." The students' frustration betrays the nature of their "activism" as charity and reveals the groups' inadequate grasp of activism as work for structural change. To me, their reaction demonstrates students' (academic) training in neoliberal virtue-signaling—the practice of insinuating moral superiority by expressing rage about an issue without investing in actual change—and a paternalistic belief in meritocracy. Their shaming mirrors the behavior Dean (2019) has observed in some of her students who:

> position[…] themselves as 'experts' . . . about a particular issue or problem, charging themselves with raising awareness about the suffering or struggles of people they tend to view and often represent as less fortunate 'others' in dire need of their benevolence, charity, or philanthropy. (p. 25)

Dean (2019) assesses these views as "entirely consistent with models for social responsibility that cohere with neoliberal governmentality, for students view themselves as deploying their superior (entrepreneurial) skills to 'develop' or 'improve' others who are largely imagined as the authors of their own suffering" (p. 25).

This way of thinking exemplifies a deep division between supposedly superior and privileged students and the university on the one hand and a community "framed as the site of underprivilege and 'otherness'" on the other (Dean, 2019, p. 29). It is essential that WGS instructors help students demolish these oppressive divisions. One way to facilitate this growth is to expose them to the voices and experiences of the communities with whom they want to work early in the semester and to consistently challenge them to assess their own privilege and

perceptions of power. Continuous reflection on their experiences, for example in the form of weekly journal entries that are only read by the individual student and the instructor, can also create a fruitful space for honest self-assessment. Lastly, the activism assignment should call on students to share any collected data with their partners and to submit a final report collecting all of their insights for any group with whom they might have worked. It should be clear to the students that their community partners will have a say in evaluating them for grading purposes.

My study further reveals that while my class broadened students' perceptions of possible activisms, it inadvertently limited the goals they set for their projects—which is only natural if "anything" can count as activism. While this shift increased students' confidence in themselves as activists, we did lose the focus on political, structural change. Evidently, institutional expectations can lead instructors to fall into the trap of creating "a . . . one-dimensional classroom, where we train students to identify oppression but not to understand the myriad ways one might respond to it" (Taylor, 2019, p. 110). In the end, most projects' objectives centered on "awareness-raising," and almost any activity could be deemed to raise "critical consciousness." Group 2 reported that "Trans Lives Matter" successfully created "a *critical consciousness* in others. Even though [their] project was small, [they] took a baby step in creating a more just society through education and action" (emphases added). Group 6, via their tabling against sexual harassment, "create[d] a movement on . . . campus that brought *awareness*" (emphasis added). Group 4 (women in arts) wanted to "expand *awareness*" (emphasis added). Group 7 set as "the goal for [their environmental tips] project . . . to raise *awareness* and plant a seed" (emphasis added). To their credit, group 7 recognized that "effective activism is not an easy and simple task to undertake." Ipso facto, not every project can automatically count as activism.

Group 1, who informed students about possible changes to Title IX with regard to sexual violence at institutions of higher education, cited *Grassroots* for their understanding that

> '[o]utrage is only valuable when it leads to reform;' and that is what really
> spoke to us. . . . [Our instructor] . . . described activism as not a 'band aid' to
> cover up an issue, but something that you do to change the system.

They explained that this conceptualization of activism was the reason they did not simply volunteer at the local Rape Crisis Center. Instead, theirs "was an effective form of activism because *educating* people is the first step to fixing a problem" (emphasis mine). They did not connect this education back to actual reform.

The definitions of activism provided by students in the post-survey emphasize that system change did not make a lasting impression. Out of nine replies, only one mentioned political consciousness, while none of Arnold's other essential components, which we repeatedly covered in class, were listed. On the contrary, the response "[a]nything a person does to spread awareness and bring about change" recaps most of the information provided. This reduction of activism to individual awareness is neatly summarized in a comment to the post-survey prompt asking for helpful examples of activism, which reads "[a]ctivism that fits within my own schedule" and prioritizes the needs of the activist, instead of the targeted oppression.

Students as Diversity Workers

After analyzing my students' projects and reflections, I sense that what is holding them back in their implementation of activism can be compared to some of the thought processes that Ahmed recorded in her extensive interviews with diversity workers. In *On Being Included*, the author presents and investigates the multilevel frustrations of diversity workers, including the amount of invisible labor they perform, and the struggles they encounter, which are consistently ignored by their colleagues (Ahmed, 2012). Many students in my study expressed similar emotions, which fed them the message that executing an impactful activism project on our campus was virtually impossible. Additionally, fighting institutional racism, whiteness, and other oppressive power relationships drains diversity workers and creates the feeling of continuously hitting a brick wall.

Perhaps one of Ahmed's (2017) most impactful findings is that the "feeling of doing diversity work is the feeling of coming up against something that does not move" (p. 96). If students' pre-existing perceptions mainly mark activism as an amalgam of overwhelming tasks for which they will most certainly be criticized, then it should come as little surprise that they are hesitant to venture far out of their comfort zones, as "[d]iversity workers become conscious of the resistance to their work" (Ahmed, 2017, p. 98). My students are very aware that, on our campus, the only events and trainings with a diversity, equity, and inclusion focus come out of the same (very) few units and are delivered by the same faces. They are not oblivious to the symbolic nature of my hiring at the Assistant Professor level as the sole full-time person in WGS to direct and grow the program, despite a heavy service, teaching, and advising load, as well as research expectations. They have witnessed that "to build women's studies is to build in an environment that needs to be transformed by women's studies; . . . [and] that if we try to shatter the foundations upon which we build something, what we build is fragile" (Ahmed, 2017, p. 174). Many of them have undoubtedly noticed that, due to my precarity as a diversity worker, I "too [pose] a problem because [I] [keep] exposing a problem" (Ahmed, 2017, p. 99). Taking on this vicious cycle might seem like an insurmountable mission to my students and might, therefore, negatively affect their views on the efficacy of feminist activism.

Their observations on our campus have likely taught my students that a "diversity worker has to manage how she appears to others" (Ahmed, 2017, p. 99), which at least partially explains why participants in my activism class opted for projects that they thought would not be perceived as "radical," nor offend their audience. They have noticed that diversity work "to make [change] come about is too much to sustain," as "[m]aking feminist points, antiracist points, sore points, is about pointing out structures that many are invested in not recognizing" (Ahmed, 2017, pp. 113, 158). This recognition, understandably, shapes the amount of time and effort they assume is realistic to invest in their projects. Lastly, students understand that "diversity work is judged as not only coming from the outside in but as brought about by outsiders" (Ahmed, 2017, p. 113). This ostracization can be intimidating; and while I encourage my students to embrace vulnerability and discomfort, these are not easy tasks to take on. As hooks (1994) has made clear, transgressing boundaries is frightening, but a necessary skill we need to instill in students in order to reap the full benefits of liberatory pedagogies that create a "connection between what [students] are learning and their overall life experiences" (p. 19).

To this end, I intend to focus more concretely on discussing diversity work strategies with my students; for, "when your task is to get information out that is less valued by an organization, the techniques for moving information become even more important" (Ahmed, 2017, p. 95). I plan on starting the semester off by discussing students' impressions of diversity work and their anxieties around it. This step will include guest visits by diversity workers on our campus. Class sessions will hold space regularly for sharing experiences with challenges and pushback that will be tackled communally. Additionally, I will guide students in more thorough research on the issues pertaining to the specific communities they want to work with before engaging with any members of these communities directly.

Conclusion

All but one student identified themselves as some form of activist in my post-survey. Some of them commented on the shift they experienced: "If you would have asked me back in August if I considered myself an activist, I would've hesitated. Even now I still question my activism. However, after experiencing this course along with implementing my own activism, I see myself as an activist 'in training' so to speak;" and "I consider myself more of an activist now because not only do I stand up for injustices and work to help implement the changes I want to see but I am also more aware of the other aspects that are involved with activism, such as the political awareness and how that affects my issue." Yet, their activist mindsets were not impetus enough to help them overcome a number of hurdles, which trapped them in similar situations to those of full-time diversity workers. Students had creative and intellectually challenging ideas for their projects but did not feel that they had the time and resources to implement them. To counteract these limitations, they latched onto a reduction of the complexity of their activism projects and fixated on the pervasive belief that education and awareness alone can change oppressive systems. It is on WGS instructors to prepare students more realistically and adequately for the challenges that social justice activism can create and to talk them through the experiences of diversity workers, in an effort to embolden them in the face of pushback and energetic (both emotional and physical) drainage.

I firmly believe that activism-based courses can make an important contribution to the WGS curriculum and feminist pedagogy more broadly. Perhaps more than ever, it is essential right now that we take a close look at our approaches to "teach[ing] students political strategy" and giving them the feeling of social "efficacy" (Rose, 1989, p. 489). As E. writes after multiple attempts at keeping a lawn sign upright during a storm failed, "[H]ey, nobody ever said that activism was easy or not frustrating," but it has the potential to show our students the power they do have as informed social change agents working in collaborative contexts.

Acknowledgements

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