



Let Your Voice Be Heard: Using Social Media to Encourage Social Action

Today's students demand that their learning be dynamic, personal, and relevant. In an effort to help my first-year students understand that their course reading, writing, and overall content have impacts beyond the classroom, I constantly seek new ways to integrate multidisciplinary materials that go beyond the classroom walls and promote social activism. I was inspired, in part, by Dr. Cassie Barnhardt's article, "Contemporary Student Activism: The Educational Contexts of Socially-Responsible Civic Engagement." In the article, she argues, "... colleges and universities [are] attempting to stimulate students' thinking so that they develop a principled philosophy of morality, which compels them to use their intellectual and interpersonal skills to be civically engaged" (9). We all want our students to care about what they're learning. By connecting course content to local civic issues and social activism, students are engaged and challenged to develop a more complicated worldview.

The Framework

I encourage this type of learning and thinking through a course entitled "Technology, the World, and You!" and a social media campaign assignment. I have taught variations of this course and assignment in freshmen seminar classes, first-year composition classes, and advanced composition classes. By framing the course's social activism component within the topic of technology, students are able to choose issues that matter to them, learn skills that help them convey their thoughts, and, ultimately, share those thoughts with a larger, public audience through social media. This is a great opportunity for students to voice their opinions about community issues in an academic manner, using tools with which they are already familiar. One clear reason students do not succeed in first-year courses is that they don't connect with the information; they don't find the material important and/or relevant to their lives. Through clear instructions regarding the purpose of social activism in the classroom, writers at any level can successfully explore and engage a topic through this assignment.

In "Technology, the World, and You!" we still focus on more traditional writing assignments such as a research proposal, a modern annotated bibliography, and a persuasive multi-source research essay. We write, read, discuss, think, critique, and engage. The social media campaign is the culminating

project of the course; because of this, students have the necessary context and credible, researched information to make a well-informed, educated argument. I'm going to share the assignment I use, some of the ways I integrate social action into the classroom, and, finally, my students' feedback. Then, you can use these ideas, tools, and techniques in your own classes to foster community involvement and social activism.

The Nuts and Bolts

As we know, today's students are digital thinkers and writers. Wright, of *Huffington Post*, claims: "... the new revolution is about information; it's about the facts. It's about us using the platform in front of us to learn, organize, and be heard. I believe the revolution has begun and we are ready for change ... so if you want to be a part of this revolution, don't look on TV, look on your phone or your computer." Our students are living proof of this. If they want to be up-to-date on current events, where do they turn? A newspaper or television show? No, they log on to Twitter and scan trending hashtags. In order to help our students successfully engage in social activism, we need to make sure that our messages hit home with today's digital audiences. One way to do this is by creating a social media campaign. Now, instead of simply using words, students use social media tools with which they are already familiar to convince their audience to pay attention and, ultimately, do something.

So, what does this social media assignment look like? Here is the basic outline I provide for my students:

1. Choose (from a given list) at least three different types of social media.
2. For each social media tool you choose, write a one-paragraph explanation identifying how it connects your technological topic to a specific audience and engages this audience in a particular way.
3. Additionally, write a 500-750-word statement that clarifies what your social media campaign is based on, who your target audience is, and why you think your campaign will be successful.
4. Finally, you will present this campaign to your peers.

During the presentation, you'll pitch your ideas to the class as though we are your target audience—you want to persuade us to listen to what you're saying and do something about the topic you're discussing.

Inevitably, my students ask: Why? Why are we doing this? Why is it important? Social media is changing how

we engage with ideas and information. Now more than ever—and with so much information at our fingertips—we have to persuade people to pay attention to our ideas and information. A social media campaign proves to a specific target audience that the issues raised are important and need to be addressed.

Also, because of their work earlier in the course, students are able to support their claims with credible research and community resources. Ultimately, students and teachers want people to pay attention and take action! If students focus on university- or community-level issues, they can enact real and meaningful change.

I provide my students with a list of potential social media options, including:

1. Twitter (at least 10 tweets);
2. Instagram photos (at least five photos);
3. Instagram stories and/or Boomerang;
4. YouTube or Vimeo video (just one, at least 30 seconds long);
5. Facebook posts (to specific organizations – at least five) or a Facebook page/group for the topic;
6. A mock-up for an educational video game related to the topic (at least one frame/image with a detailed description);
7. A Comic (if appropriate for the audience);
8. A logo for the campaign;
9. A Prezi presentation (at least 10 “slides”); or
10. A Pinterest board (at least 15 items).

While this is only a partial list that I cultivated with actual student feedback, it is also dynamic. If there is another medium or topic in which a student has a particularly interest, he or she can explore that curiosity. For example, I once had a very motivated student actually create a simple computer program for an educational videogame. The possibilities are nearly limitless with this type of assignment and there’s something for every student, even if they don’t use social media!

There will always be a handful of students who either do not feel comfortable using social media—perhaps an account was hacked or they are worried about a future career—or they simply do not want to use social media. Much of what social media does can be replicated in an analog or static format. For instance, instead of creating a Twitter account for a campaign, a student could compose 10 tweets and a hashtag in a Word document and submit the information to the instructor. There are alternatives for nearly every type of social media; after all, what did we do before the internet?

As stated above, part of my social media assignment is a public presentation. In the past, I have used a presentation model in face-to-face courses; however, there is room for innovation and creativity here as well. For example, students can share their social media campaign with a

community or campus-based resource for publication. In one of my freshmen seminar courses, my students took it upon themselves to arrange a meeting with other like-minded students on campus to discuss the issue of underage drinking and create an alternate social circle.

A social media campaign is an ideal opportunity for students to practice the skills they foster during a semester—critical thinking, active reading, concise writing, attention to audience, attention to purpose, and attention to design—in just one assignment. In many ways, the culminating campaign is a true reflection of a student’s growth and progress through a semester. Although students’ thinking and writing may appear different than traditional composition assignments, these creative types of projects are just as valuable, if not more so, as an essay.

Beyond the First-Year Classroom

There are very clear applications for this type of course and assignment in a variety of disciplines. For instance, students in psychology courses can create a social media campaign about the different social stigmas college students might face; the campaign could also include local resources (at the university or community level) for people struggling with similar issues. Additionally, an assignment like this could be particularly beneficial for students in freshmen seminar courses who may be unaware of or afraid to use campus and/or community resources. If students’ peers provide the information, discuss potential benefits, and encourage everyone to use such resources, there will be a much higher buy-in.

If we think of our students as activists with opinions, voices, and thoughts that deserve to be heard, then our students can and will become activists. By engaging with topics that students find important, they experience more transference of skills *and* information. In creating social media campaign, students learn they have a voice—and that their voice matters. Students who share their ideas and opinions with the world in an educated way are social activists.

Have you used social media to encourage student engagement? Let us know in the comment section or on [Facebook!](#)

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Melody will also facilitate NISOD’s April 13 webinar, “Let Your Voice Be Heard: Using Social Media to Encourage Social Action.” **Register now** to learn more about how you can foster social activism in the classroom.

Works Cited

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