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## What Will You March For?

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# Critical Pedagogy

## What Will You March For?

ERINN BENTLEY AND MADISON WORKMAN

Every single day people in this country are advocating – from protesting racism, to fighting for or against legislation, to holding large scale marches in Washington, D.C., to posting a simple Tweet. Real-world advocacy takes many forms; yet, many of our K-12 students today seem disinterested and unaffected by such acts. Recent tragedies have given students a platform to advocate for legislature for specific causes. Specifically, the school shooting in Parkland, Florida led thousands of students all over the country to protest gun violence in schools through a variety of mediums. The potential for protesting exists within all students. The challenge, then, is helping all students see their potential for advocating for real world issues. One very powerful way for advocacy may be through students' own words. As English teachers, we believe in the power of written and spoken words. One voice can change a person's viewpoint, opinion, or world-view. As explained in *Beliefs about Students' Right to Write*, "Words are a powerful tool of expression, a means to clarify, explore, inquire, and learn as well as a way to record present moments for the benefit of future generations" (National Council of Teachers of English [NCTE], 2014). We believe that writing can extend beyond the classroom and impact real audiences, resulting in real changes. Take, for example, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech or Kwame Alexander's "Take A Knee" video-poem. These texts are persuasive and powerful examples of how writing can spur others to engage in advocacy work.

As teachers, though, we do not simply want to show our students how other authors' texts can affect readers and impact our worlds. Instead, we also want our students to witness how their own spoken and written words can bring about changes inside the classroom and beyond. To accomplish these goals, it is important to develop engaging writing tasks in which students compose for real-world purposes and audiences. NCTE (2016) notes,

Often, in school, students write only to prove that they

did something they were asked to do, in order to get credit for it. Or, students are taught a single type of writing and are led to believe this type will suffice in all situations. Since writers outside school have many different purposes beyond demonstrating accountability and they use more diverse genres of writing, it is important that students have experiences within school that teach them how writing differs with purpose, audience, and other elements of the situation.

Interestingly, students also value writing tasks that are personally relevant and address a public audience. In a recent study, researchers interviewed high school students across the nation and discovered:

Teens in our focus groups said strongly that being able to self-select topics and assignments made their mandatory writing more enjoyable and compelling... They said, in effect, that if they were going to spend time and energy doing schoolwork, they wanted it to be something that related specifically to them and their interests. Teens also found it motivating when their writing could have broader impact through being publicly shared in class, in person, in print, or on the Internet. (Lenhart, Arafeh, Smith, & Macgill, 2008, p. 58)

As teachers, we also recognize that it can be challenging to find the time and space for students and teachers to engage in such writing tasks. Mandated curricula, standardized assessments, and increased class sizes are just a few factors that impact teaching decisions and practices. How, then, can we raise students' voices and help them view writing as more than an academic task, but as an act of empowerment? Finally, how can we promote such literacy practices while still meeting mandated instructional or curricular requirements?

These questions laid the foundation for transforming a "traditional" writing assignment into one focused on advocacy. This assignment was situated in a 10th grade world literature classroom. As part of the high school's literacy plan, every 10th grade student was required to compose a research

paper during spring semester. English teachers were provided flexibility in designing the focus of these papers, provided that they aligned with the following state writing standard: “Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence” (Georgia Department of Education, 2015, p. 2). In this article, we will describe the new project that was developed, entitled “What Will You March For?” In this project, students analyzed effective persuasive writing in a variety of mediums, conducted research on a topic of personal interest, and composed both a traditional research paper and a protest medium focused on their chosen topic. In the following sections, we will describe how the project was situated within a larger instructional unit, the process for teaching the project, and the products students created.

### Laying the Foundation: What Constitutes a Powerful Text?

To lay the foundation for this project, students first needed to analyze rhetorical appeals and devices in widely known and effective mediums of protest throughout history. We began with one piece of rhetoric that many students read during their time in high school, Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech. Students took turns reading the speech, listening to the speech, and watching video footage of the live speech. The students deconstructed the speech piece by piece analyzing the ethos, pathos, logos, and other persuasive techniques Dr. King used, such as repetition and literary devices. This laid the foundation for the students’ view of powerful texts and persuasive mediums of protest. Students next analyzed Josephine Baker’s “Speech at the March on Washington,” which was given at the same assembly as Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech, but took a very different rhetorical approach. Again, students engaged in a close reading of the text, noting Baker’s use of appeals and devices.

These two texts aided students in understanding not only *what* various rhetorical appeals were but also *why* they were effective. To further broaden the students’ repertoire of powerful, persuasive texts, students also read Mahatma Gandhi’s “Letter to the Viceroy,” in which he utilized peaceful protest through the means of a letter to accomplish his goals. Students once again immersed themselves in the history behind this powerful text before analyzing it to fully allow them to understand the impact that such a small gesture, a single letter, can have on an entire society of people. This also aided

students in their analysis of the rhetoric Gandhi used within this protest medium.

These three texts, mandatory in the 10th grade curriculum within the school district, though powerful, were not necessarily relevant for the students in terms of modern-day protest mediums. They greatly aided students in understanding the use of rhetoric in protest mediums throughout history, but in order to see the relevancy in advocacy and rhetoric, students needed to shift to more contemporary protest mediums. The students then took several days to analyze both the effective and the ineffective protest mediums in today’s society. As they analyzed each medium, they determined the medium’s claim, effectiveness, and also tried to find room for improvement. The various protest mediums they analyzed included poems, spoken words, infographics, songs, Tweets, political cartoons, political art, children’s books, and protest signs. These mediums were pre-selected for students to ensure appropriateness and to ensure students were able to see both effective and ineffective examples of each medium. These “texts” helped students find relevance in the contemporary protest mediums that had been used in the society in which *they* currently live.

### The Research Process: What Will You March For?

Once students had taken several days to analyze a wide variety of protest mediums, they were then posed this question: “If given the choice, what would you march for?”

Student's Name:	
Research Paper Position:	
	<b>SOURCE GUIDE # 1</b>
MLA Citation:	
Abstract:	
Why did you choose this article?	
Bulleted useful quotes or concepts and their page numbers (NO PAGE NUMBERS BECAUSE NOT AVAILABLE IN PDF FORMAT)	
	<b>SOURCE GUIDE # 2</b>
MLA Citation:	
Abstract:	
Why did you choose this article?	
Bulleted useful quotes or concepts and their page numbers (NO PAGE NUMBERS BECAUSE NOT AVAILABLE IN PDF FORMAT)	

Figure 1

## What Will You March For?

Students took time to research topics in the news and in the protest mediums they had just carefully studied, and each narrowed their search to a single topic of study for their research projects. Before the students began writing, they first found supporting sources. The students used “Source Guides” to help them determine which sources were credible and list out the important information they could pull from each source as they were researching. (See Figure 1).

Once students had 3-5 “Source Guides,” they were able to move on to outlining their research papers. We spent an entire day of class discussing what constitutes a great outline and why outlining research papers is such an important step in the research process. Students then typed up an outline, using their sources and a template, to map out their papers. Using the outline, students were able to begin composing each of the required pieces of the research paper.

They began with the body paragraphs and started off using their “Source Guides”. We had a body paragraph workshop to look at good examples of body paragraphs within research papers and from there, the students used a template to draft their own body paragraphs. Students did the same for both the introduction and conclusion of their research paper. Once they had an entire research paper, the students revised. At first, they revised independently, taking the time to ensure they had all of the components. Then, they peer reviewed their rough drafts. Lastly, students learned about MLA format and created works cited pages for their papers.

## Protest Mediums: How Will you March?

It was not until after they completed the research process that the students began to shift their focus to creating contemporary protest mediums for their chosen topics. The students had already researched these topics prior to writing the research paper, and to wrap-up the project, students ended by coming up with their own protest mediums. As a class, we returned to the rhetorical appeals we had discussed weeks prior and created charts together on the general pros and cons for using each medium, as well as do’s and don’ts when creating them rhetorically. Students were also asked to discuss how the pros and cons for each medium would vary depending on the topic, which might affect the intended audience.

From a list, students were able to choose the protest medium(s) they wanted to create in support of the research project they had been working on. Students were able to be creative and showcase their artistic and creative abilities. They used the lists we had created while creating their protest me-

diums. From these lists, the rubrics for each medium was created, so students were held accountable by the very standards they had set. (See Appendix A).

## Student Projects

The majority of the students in the class took this project very seriously and the results were undeniable products of weeks of hard work. Across the board, the research papers were strong. Students took the time to outline, draft, revise, and polish their papers to into final products that they were proud of. In terms of the protest mediums, students chose to create protest signs, infographics, songs, poems, raps, political art, 3D models, letters, and more. The topics varied widely as well from bullying to recycling, Planned Parenthood to teen pregnancies, and body image to high school wrestling.

One student, who created her protest medium in the form of political artwork, chose the topic of body image, as represented through social media. The student highlighted the concept of “celebrity worship” through social media platforms, such as Instagram, Facebook, and Snapchat. (See Figure 2).



Figure 2

Another student, who created his protest medium in the form of a spoken word, chose the topic of bullying. This student included literary devices, repetition, and other persuasive rhetorical appeals in his spoken word, which was told in a narrative form from the perspective of a bullied student. For his protest medium, the student wrote the lyrics, recorded the spoken word, and presented to the class. (See Appendix B). A third student, who created her protest medium in the form of an infographic, chose the topic of deforestation. For her infographic, she spent time collecting hard facts and turning them into visually appealing graphs on her infographic. (See Figure 3).



Figure 3

These are just a few examples of the protest mediums the students spent countless hours creating. While it was very impressive to see these students, who typically struggled with apathy regarding the assignments they were given, put their heart and soul into the research, the papers, and the protest mediums they created, I was mostly impressed by their presentations. The students stood proudly in front of their peers and discussed the importance of their issues. Most of the students had become heavily invested in these topics, and their passion for them was obvious.

### Concluding Thoughts

In reflecting on this project, we believe the “traditional” research paper component was significant. Students needed to learn how to compose a powerful, persuasive research paper. After all, this type of writing is a required element in the school’s curriculum and aligns with the state’s ELA standards. As these 10th grade students progress in their education, they will need to write similar research papers for English and other content area classes. However, the relevance in writing a research paper for persuasion purposes was difficult for many of the students to grasp. The purpose for the paper was to persuade - but, to persuade whom? This paper was directed to an audience of one - the teacher. This paper did not address a real-world audience like the powerful persuasive texts studied

earlier in the instructional unit. Many of the students felt passionately about their topics, but unlike Martin Luther King, Jr. or Josephine Baker, they were not able to authentically advocate using the classroom research paper genre.

Writing for real reasons and for real audiences matters to students. As evidenced in a recent study, “...teens report being pleased, inspired and motivated by composing a piece of writing that was effective at communicating their thoughts and – in particular – was recognized positively” (Lenhart, Arafeh, Smith, & Macgill, 2008, p. 54). That is, adolescent writers want their voices to be heard and acknowledged. For that reason, the protest medium portion of this project was highly significant. As students read aloud their poems, showed peers their protest signs, and displayed their political cartoons, they received immediate responses from their audience. They were not writing for a grade; they were writing to advocate for a personally relevant cause. They were not utilizing rhetorical appeals and other devices in order to meet criteria in a rubric; they were using language and images to persuade real people. Rather than waiting for a final project grade from the teacher to determine if their arguments were effective, the students could gauge their effectiveness by watching their peers’ immediate responses.

Our hope, with this project, is that the students realize that advocacy is not something reserved for adults. For politicians. For lobbyists. For musicians. For celebrities. For others. As critically-minded citizens, students can be advocates as well. To do so, they need to learn how to effectively persuade others using a wide range of mediums. They also need to learn how to support their claims, so they speak with credibility. These goals, we feel, were accomplished with this project. We also believe the more “traditional” research paper component to this project was needed in order for the protest component to be successful. Too often, students make claims that are purely opinion-based or lack substantive evidence. By first requiring the students to thoroughly research their topics, followed by opportunities for them to revise their use of rhetorical appeals, the students were able to make thought-provoking and convincing arguments within their protest mediums. Moving forward, we will look for opportunities for students to broaden their audiences, perhaps by facilitating a school-wide advocacy assembly, by encouraging students to participate community-based marches, and by guiding students in writing letters to legislators. This project, we hope, is just the first step in helping students raise their voices and serve as change agents in their schools, communities, and country.

## What Will You March For?

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Appendix A

Protest Medium List and Rubric

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

**PROTEST MEDIUM RESEARCH COMPONENT RUBRIC**

For this portion of your research project, you will be choosing 1-2 protest mediums to create for your research topic. Choose the mediums below you wish to create, but be aware that you have to end up with a total of 100 points. Some of the mediums below are only worth 50. Thus, you'd have to create two from the list (CANNOT be the same one). If you want to do one that is not on the list, come see me!

**DUE DATE: 4 | 19 (Wednesday)**

Protest Medium		Points for each
Social Media Post	Poem	50
Protest Sign		
Short Story	Speech	100
Infographic	Letter	
Political Cartoon	Song	
Political Art	Spoken Word	

Protest Medium (x2 if worth 100)	10	8	5	3	0
Protest Medium's content is relevant to research paper topic and position.					
Protest Medium's content is original and creative.					
Protest Medium is well-written and grammatically correct.					
Protest Medium is effective in persuading and doesn't exhibit any "turn offs"					
Protest Medium's presentation (no pencil, no notebook paper, should be typed, printer paper, poster board, good quality work)					

\_\_\_\_\_/50

Appendix B

Student Spoken Word Poem

Ring ting ting  
 The alarm goes off saying it's a new day  
 But while the sun shines bright, all that is seen is the darkest shades of grey  
 And why?  
 Why does a fourth grader, a middle schooler, or a sophomore in high school  
 Not want to attend their classes today?  
 The answer is simple  
 "Bullies"  
 You see, most aren't aware of what's been going on  
 Kids picking on kids and crossing those lines that have been drawn  
 Pushing, kicking, being knocked to the ground  
 Up against the lockers, helpless and bound  
 Mumbling, bumbling, trying to stay sane  
 Stumbling, fumbling  
 Just wishing to get up again  
 But he can't  
 Tormented everyday by the terror that roams the classrooms existing  
 just to make an existence non-existent  
 Walking in the halls, he falls, and calls, yet there's no voice to answer  
 He says, "I don't know if I can do this anymore."  
 Their words hitting him, cutting him, damaging at the core  
 You see, we think we've solved it  
 One of the world's greatest terrors  
 Yet nobody wants to acknowledge it  
 Whether it's a fist to the face  
 A comment towards a race  
 Saying someone has no place  
 Breaking and shattering like a small empty vase  
 But we all know the truth

That they don't get any saving grace  
 They've embraced and faced that they're looked at as nothing but a disgrace  
 And what do we do? We stand aside and let it happen  
 As we stand and watch and do nothing but laugh at them  
 Now I hope this hits you in your feelings  
 The fact that this happens daily for millions  
 And all that some do is act as a bystanding civilian  
 Thinking of standing up but they're just not willing  
 Parents say "stand up, pick yourself back up, and fight back,"  
 But he knows he can't do that  
 Adults can try and understand what it's like for their kid  
 But they'll never know that he ran and hid  
 Scared of expressing his true self, and from the look on his face, you could obviously tell  
 While everybody thought it was nothing but a joke  
 That kid on the ground finally broke  
 "Get outta here", "go kill yourself", "nobody likes you"  
 That's all that some say  
 Picking on them cause they're fat, weird, and gay  
 Now some try to stand up  
 But they fall right back down cause they're weak  
 From being called stupid, and idiot, and a geek.  
 They try to eat, they try to sleep  
 But they can't cause they fear what will happen next week