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Harnessing Your Feminist Rage: A Multimedia Assignment for Upper-Level Courses

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Harnessing Your Feminist Rage: A Multimedia Assignment for Upper-Level Courses

“Every woman has a well-stocked arsenal of anger potentially useful against those oppressions, personal and institutional, which brought that anger into being. Focused with precision it can become a powerful source of energy serving progress and change.”

–Audre Lorde, “The Uses of Anger”

Introduction and Rationale

Personal Experience, Emotions, and Feminist Epistemologies

Students who enter my classroom often view emotion as antithetical to rigorous academic work. Particularly in the field of communication and media studies, which employs both social scientific and critical cultural methods, students often latch onto the notion of the objective, dispassionate researcher with total emotional distance from their objects of study as the only correct orientation toward research.

However, feminist epistemologies and pedagogies emphasize the importance of understanding our positionalities and experiences in relation to our work (Belenky et al., 1997). Beyond engaging productively with one’s experiences and identity, my pedagogical approach also encourages students to engage with the emotional impacts of their work; in particular, to reflect upon their anger as a productive force. Heteronormative gender norms often discourage women from engaging with their anger (see, for example, Holmes, 2004), but ample research has demonstrated that anger is centrally motivating for social and political activism (Lorde, 1997; Woliver, 1993; Goodwin et al., 2009; Castells, 2012). Scholars and activists continue to call for feminists and, in particular, women, to utilize their anger as a motivating force for social change (Cooper, 2018; Chemaly, 2019; Traister, 2019) and to harness its efficacy in the classroom (hooks, 1994).

But this does not mean that we should approach our personal experiences and feelings without a critical eye. Feminist pedagogies also point out that, while individual standpoints and emotions are integral to the learning process, they are also limited by their contexts and the structures of power in which they exist (Bostow et al., 2015). Therefore, it is crucial to approach emotions, including anger, with self-reflexivity and critique in the classroom. Emotional literacy and self-reflexivity are especially important in our current media environment as provocative content circulates more quickly and widely than ever before because of social media. Indeed, recent research on anger, particularly as it is mediated

online, points to its potential downsides. These include backlash (Sawaoka & Monin, 2018), emotional distress, deepened cultural divides, and dampened political impacts (Crockett, 2017). While such concerns can promote the unproductive tone policing of digital publics, particularly when those who express outrage are from marginalized groups, it is important to remember that feminist anger, especially in online spaces, is not without some risks.

Rage Becomes Her: Exploring Anger in the Feminist Classroom

In service of these epistemological and pedagogical underpinnings, I created a three-part multimedia assignment that encourages students to think critically about feminist rage, particularly as reflected through social media. First, students analyze a media text (film, television show, social media post, etc.) or phenomenon (a scandal, controversy, news story, etc.) that made them angry and reflect upon that anger. Then, using whichever medium they choose (blog post, Instagram live, TikTok, Twitter thread, etc.), students express their anger to the audience of their choice to meet a specific goal: to provoke an apology from the offender, to encourage a boycott, etc. Finally, students reflect on their expression of anger and their experience creating their response. Overall, the goal is for students to combine their knowledge of feminist theories and their interests in social justice and popular culture to explore the productive potential of feminist rage. I have used this assignment as a final project in an upper-level feminist media studies course, but with some changes, it could be assigned in a wide variety of classes across a range of disciplines.

Why Reflect on Rage?

I created this assignment because questions of rage have come up so frequently in my classes over the last several years, particularly in relation to politics, pop culture, and social media. Students are fascinated by “cancel culture” and digital accountability practices (Clark, 2020), and many of them are also disillusioned and angry about the political, cultural, and environmental circumstances of the world around them. The overarching goal of this assignment is for students to engage with and explore their own feminist rage within the context of scholarly and activist work.

Learning Objectives

The learning objectives for this assignment are:

- To demonstrate understanding of intersectional feminist theories by analyzing a media text or phenomenon

- To use knowledge of rhetoric and persuasion to identify and execute communicative goals
- To reflect on one's experiences by examining emotional responses
- To engage with digital accountability practices, particularly the emotional labor of calling out
- To gain a deeper, experiential understanding of the connections between emotion, scholarship, and activism

Explanation

Discussion and preparation for this assignment spans roughly one week (two 1.5-hour class periods). Below I have outlined assigned readings, provided a loose outline of lecture and discussion topics, and included the full assignment prompt. For more detailed resources, including slide decks and PDFs, please do not hesitate to contact the author.

Assigned Readings + Discussion Topics

Day 1: Feminist Rage

Lecture and discussion topics include:

- Defining anger and outrage
- Expressing anger for activist and political work
- Negotiating anger within the feminist movement, highlighting women of color feminists' resistance to the centering of white, straight, middle class women's issues

Assigned readings:

- Pgs. 1-7 from Sara Ahmed's *Complaint!*
- Introduction from Brittney Cooper's *Eloquent Rage: A Black Feminist Discovers Her Superpower*
- Mary Holmes's "Feeling Beyond Rules: Politicizing the Sociology of Emotion and Anger in Feminist Politics"
- Audre Lorde's "The Uses of Anger"

Day 2: Digital Rage, Callouts, and "Cancel Culture"

Lecture and discussion topics include:

- Defining and contesting "call out" and "cancel culture"
- Introducing "digital accountability practices"
- The pros and cons of digital anger
- Understanding the risks of calling out, especially backlash and harassment

- Strategic callouts: rhetoric, persuasive strategies, and modes of message delivery

Assigned Readings:

- William Brady and M.J. Crockett’s “How Effective Is Online Outrage?”
- Meredith D. Clark’s “DRAG THEM: A Brief Etymology of so-Called ‘Cancel Culture’”
- Caitlin E. Lawson’s “Skin Deep: Callout Strategies, Influencers, and Racism in the Online Beauty Community”
- Lisa Nakamura’s “The Unwanted Labour of Social Media: Women of Colour Call Out Culture as Venture Community Management”

Additional Resources:

- The National Sexual Violence Resource Center’s “Online Harassment Resources”

Assignment Prompt

This is a three-part assignment.

Part I: First, students introduce, explain, and analyze the media text/phenomenon they have chosen. They begin by introducing the text or phenomenon and providing their personal narrative with it. Then students add a brief, scholarly analysis to their description and personal narrative/reactions. Using 3-5 scholarly sources, they analyze the text and discuss the messages it conveys about sex, gender, race, and/or sexuality using intersectional feminist theory. Students should also use this analysis to reflect on, explain, or perhaps critique their emotional reactions and opinions about the text. How do the scholarly tools they’ve developed in class build on or help them explain their feelings? This section will be roughly 750-1000 words.

Part II: Next, it's time to decide what to do with their anger. They’ll choose 1) their goal and 2) their audience. These two choices inform which persuasive and argumentative tactics they will use as well as their mode of delivery. Their mode of delivery must include some form of digital technology. We will discuss how to make choices about goals, audience, tactics, and mode of delivery in class. However, students are not required to publicly share their expression of anger, particularly given the possibility of backlash. The length of this section will vary.

Part III: Lastly, students step back and reflect on their anger. What were their goals? Who was their intended audience? How did they make decisions for Part II and why? What makes their argumentative strategies and mode of delivery

ideal? What did it feel like to create their response? Do they plan to share the message publicly? Why or why not? If so, what are their concerns? If not, how do they think they might feel if they delivered this message? And finally, how did this exercise change (or fail to change) their thoughts and opinions on the role of anger in political, activist, and/or scholarly work? How might they approach politics, activism, or their work as a student differently because of this assignment? It's okay if they don't think they will -- explore that, too! This section will be roughly 750-1000 words.

Evaluation

Once students have had a chance to begin the assignment, I ask each student to attend office hours to discuss their plans with me and raise any questions or concerns they have. If necessary, I cancel one class period to ensure everyone is available. This provides an opportunity to troubleshoot issues and ensure that students are on the right track.

Evaluation of this assignment is based upon the following criteria:

- Self-reflexivity:
 - Part I: The writer not only describes their emotional reactions but explains and critiques them. They explore what motivated their anger and discuss their anger in terms of broader systems of sexist oppression.
 - Part III: The writer fully explores the emotional impact of doing the assignment and includes an effective reflection on how, if at all, the assignment changed their approach to scholarship and/or activism and politics.
- Analysis: The writer uses appropriate analytical methods to engage in scholarly critique of the text or phenomenon that motivated their anger.
 - Part I: The writer includes an argument about what the text or phenomenon means. The argument is robustly supported with concrete details from the text or phenomenon.
- Integration of theory: The writer uses one or more critical theories to:
 - Part I: Explain and reflect on their anger
 - Part I: Analyze their text or phenomenon
- Persuasion and argumentation: The writer's angry response is well-explained and appropriate given their goals.
 - Part II: The mode of delivery for their message is effective and would reach their intended audience.
 - Part II: Their persuasive techniques are effective given their goals, intended audience, and mode of delivery.

- Part III: Using concrete details from their response, the writer clearly justifies their mode of delivery and persuasive techniques.
- Creativity: The writer's response is especially well-designed and/or inventive. This criterion is *optional* and meant only to acknowledge additional labor.
 - Part II: Additional consideration will be given to writers whose response is especially creative and impactful, particularly if the writer took extra time and effort in crafting an artistic and well-designed response. However, *students will not be penalized* for simpler responses.

Debriefing

Because I assign this project in a feminist *media* studies course, students analyze and respond to a media text or phenomenon. However, this assignment can be adjusted to fit a variety of topics by changing the subject of the project: a policy or law, a book or novel, a controversy on campus, a political speech, etc.

While most students have found the project straightforward and enjoyable, I highlight potential problems you may face. First, if students choose to share their response publicly, they may open themselves up to backlash and harassment. Instructors should be open about this risk. Most of my students have chosen not to post their responses or to share them online with limited audiences. If any students choose to share their angry responses more publicly, instructors should be sure to highlight resources to help them manage potential harassment, such as those provided by the National Sexual Violence Resource Center listed in the prior section, as well as any counseling services provided on campus in case of crisis. Encourage students to reflect on their decisions about whether and how they share their response in Part III.

Next, some may have difficulty identifying the goals of each section and distinguishing between analysis and self-reflection. To ameliorate this issue, instructors can include scaffolding assignments that allow students to workshop each section. Such smaller assignments allow students to get feedback to ensure they're on the right track and meeting all requirements from each section. Peer review and individual or small group meetings with the instructor can also help to ensure they understand each part's goals.

Some students also reported feeling pressure to generate a creative, labor-intensive response in Part II without having the skills to do so. Some students, many of whom had existing production or design backgrounds, created elaborate video responses or designed attractive Instagram images that made other students insecure during peer review. Be sure to emphasize that creativity, design, and

production are not the point of the assignment and aren't a key factor in the evaluation.

Finally, some students may experience discomfort with the assignment and be reticent to reflect on their own anger. Be sure to acknowledge and hold space for that discomfort. Encourage students to choose a topic that allows them to productively engage with their feelings but doesn't cause too much distress. Additionally, at the end of the project, some students may remain unconvinced that emotion has any place in scholarship. Emphasizing epistemological differences can help to address this resistance. Remind them that your goal isn't to convince them this is the only or best way to do research, but simply provide a new perspective that allows them to engage with analysis in a different way.

Assessment

Overall, students report finding the assignment both enlightening and enjoyable. In particular, many students have reported that this assignment was the first time any professor had asked them about their emotions. Particularly given the growing mental health crisis among undergraduate students (Ezarik, 2022), they found it gratifying and cathartic to reflect on their feelings.

In addition to its popularity, the assignment accomplishes several goals. Particularly in the analytical section in Part I, students have an opportunity to apply feminist theories they've learned throughout the semester and demonstrate an active understanding of those theories in a way that is personally relevant to them. The assignment drives home the broad applicability of our coursework to their daily media consumption.

Further, the assignment allows students to explore the power of emotions not only in theory but in practice. By working with and through their anger, students have an opportunity to feel their way into politics (Papacharissi, 2014) and activism, engaging with their media environment and their scholarship in an explicitly affective manner.

Finally, the assignment opens space for students to explore so-called "cancel culture" and callouts in a reflexive and experiential way. While students have a range of feelings about the diverse set of social media practices that fall under the umbrella of "cancel culture," most of them have never engaged in callouts or other digital accountability practices themselves. Through course readings, class discussions, and the assignment itself, students come to understand the emotional labor of calling out and its potential social and political efficacy in a new light. These insights are incredibly important as students navigate increasingly tense, fraught, and fruitful digital conversations.

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