

May 2023

## Moving Students Toward Activism: Microblogging about Gender-Based Violence to Channel Emotion and Encourage Action

Janell C. Bauer

California State University, Chico, [jcbauer@csuchico.edu](mailto:jcbauer@csuchico.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/feministpedagogy>



Part of the [Gender, Race, Sexuality, and Ethnicity in Communication Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Bauer, Janell C. (2023) "Moving Students Toward Activism: Microblogging about Gender-Based Violence to Channel Emotion and Encourage Action," *Feminist Pedagogy*. Vol. 3: Iss. 3, Article 2.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/feministpedagogy/vol3/iss3/2>

This Original Teaching Activity is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at DigitalCommons@CalPoly. It has been accepted for inclusion in Feminist Pedagogy by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@CalPoly. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@calpoly.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@calpoly.edu).

## **Moving Students Toward Activism: Microblogging about Gender-Based Violence to Channel Emotion and Encourage Action**

### **Introduction and Rationale**

In many classes, emotionally challenging course content arises at the point in the semester when students are getting more comfortable with one another and the general course topic. For students in gender studies courses, a unit on gender-based violence can be jarring. Like many faculty, I prepare students in advance by sharing slides, support resources, and previews for the readings. I preface the material with the note that even though we are desensitized to violence, learning about the intensity and magnitude of gender-based violence and how it can touch our lives is difficult. As an organizational grief researcher, I find that it is valuable to acknowledge the range of emotional experiences at work (and in the classroom as students' work environment) (Bauer & Murray, 2018), rather than reproduce an artificial boundary between the personal and professional that excludes emotional experience from the work of learning (Kirby et al., 2003). To that end, teaching gender-based violence creates an opportunity for faculty to actively integrate the emotional experiences of our students. Faculty can reflect on how to help students engage their emotions to enhance their learning and participate in gender activism. Students also benefit through the opportunity to reflect on their feelings and engage their emotional experience as part of their learning. In this assignment, I share how I've used a microblogging assignment to channel students' emotions about gender-based violence into action-oriented digital activism content.

Learning about gender-based violence can trigger complex emotions. While grief may not be the first emotion that comes to mind, people experience grief-related emotions in response to many different types of loss. In the case of gender-based violence pedagogy, students can find themselves mourning the loss of security in the society they thought was reasonably safe and non-sexist. Even though many students have grown up with high-profile sexual harassment cases, the #MeToo movement, and the threat of sexism, injustice and gender-based violence have often existed separate from their lived experience. When faced with the prevalence and impact of the topic in class, it can become salient in a way that it hasn't before. It is a significant loss to realize that you are part of a society that doesn't protect you or share your values. This isn't just the case for women, but also for men who are confronted with guilt, denial or bargaining in relation to statistics about male perpetrators and the stigma around male victims.

### *Moving Emotion to Action*

Channeling emotions into productive action has been a valuable tool for feminists (Lawson, 2022). Feminist rage and feminist anger can be usefully cultivated or invoked to inspire activism that challenges patriarchal structures and practices (Kulbaga & Spencer, 2022; Lawson, 2022; Lorde, 1997). I argue that the same can be said for grief over gender inequity and gender-based violence, especially considering anger is part of grief (Kessler & Kübler-Ross, 2014). In particular, digital activism is an accessible resource for bringing light to the grief and anger associated with harassment, everyday sexism, microaggressions, intimate partner violence, and rape on college campuses. For example, Linabary et al. (2019) described how the use of feminist hashtags like #MeToo #WhyIStayed, #SayHerName, #TimesUp, #YesAllWomen, allow socially and geographically dispersed people to connect and share stories. Further, digital activism opens space to call out oppression and make violence, sexism, and racism visible within the mainstream (Baer, 2016). In addition to hashtags, blogging and microblogging are widely accessible and act as an

important mechanism for conversations about feminist issues (Keller, 2012). Microblogging refers to short content elements that are shared on social media platforms like Twitter or Instagram. These usually contain visual elements or links to additional content and media such as videos, memes, news updates and more. In this way, digital media offers diverse formats for communicating about complex topics. Utilizing digital media to communicate about gender-based violence provides students with an opportunity to use an easily accessible tool to channel their feelings and new knowledge into feminist activism. Additionally, acknowledging feelings of grief related to gender-based violence, and providing productive ways to respond, can create space for people to share their emotional reactions and help mitigate negative consequences that can arise from ignoring grief-related emotions (Hazen, 2003; Doka, 2008).

### *Embracing Movement as Pedagogy*

To engage the emotional experience of learning about gender-based violence and create an opportunity to transition rage and depression into empowerment, I developed a microblogging assignment where students turn what they learn and feel into digital activism content. This assignment is designed to promote movement from learning to engaging; from feelings to action. Students move their own ideas and feelings forward through research and exposure to different arguments and information about a topic. Students also move ideas into activism through the process of transforming their own feelings and thoughts into written and visual content that can be shared online with activist intention. Finally, student content facilitates the movement of gender-based violence topics, experiences, and statistics in and through the public digital space.

### **Learning Objectives**

The primary goal of this assignment is to create an Instagram post that builds visibility for issues related to gender-based violence and offers a potential source of activism or intervention. Students reflect on what they have learned to answer the question: How can we spread awareness and prevent or reduce an aspect of gender-based violence?

Assignment learning objectives include:

1. To demonstrate knowledge about different aspects of gender-based violence, including street harassment, everyday sexism and media representation, intimate partner violence, responses to gender-based violence against men, sexual assault on college campuses and options for activism and intervention
2. To reflect on one's emotional reactions to learning about gender-based violence through group discussion
3. To explore and reflect on digital activism related to gender-based violence
4. To gain experience with writing microblog content and creating microblog infographics
5. To understand how to move class conversations from individual experiences to digital activism; and reflect on the limitations of using social media to promote social change

### **Explanation**

This assignment is part of a two-week unit on gender-based violence and occurs late in the semester. The unit consists of lecture, film, popular press readings and group discussion. I have used this assignment in a 200-level Gender and Sexuality in Media course made up of journalism and public relations majors and students who are taking the course for general education credit. This assignment could be applied to any level course that deals with gender-based violence such

as a seminar on Gender Communication, Gender Activism, Gender in Society, Introduction to Women's Studies, Women in Contemporary Societies, Digital Media Activism and others. For upper division courses, adjustments could be made to the expectations for content that is supported by original-source data and research and more advanced visual design.

Lecture and Discussion Topics (each over a 75-minute class, twice a week)

- Street harassment
- Gender-based violence in media
- Intimate partner violence
- Gender-based violence on college campuses
- Gender-based violence interventions (i.e., *The Bystander Moment*)

Sample Supplemental Readings and Resources

I usually use a textbook chapter for an overview on the topic and then supplement with other media and resources. Here is a list of sample materials that need to be updated as new materials become available:

- Counseling center information; off-campus medical support; Title IX reporting information
- Violence against women – it's a men's issue (Jackson Katz, TedX)
- A crisis of campus sexual assault (Huff, 2022)
- Male rape is no laughing matter, even though we're taught to think it is (Andrew Bailey, Everyday Feminism, Aug. 24, 2014)
- Campus sexual assault data for your university
- Google search activity for news articles about sexual assault in the Greek system and sexual assault in media organizations (there are many articles)
- Examples of gender activism online (i.e. "16 days of activism against gender-based violence," UN Women, 2022)

During this two-week unit, students learn about different aspects of gender-based violence, including street harassment, intimate partner violence, responses to gender-based violence against men, sexual assault on college campuses and options for activism and intervention. Groups are formed by either student selection or instructor design. For a GE class including many majors and academic years, I have had success building groups that pair students with more experience (ie. junior/senior; gender studies majors) with newer, less experienced students (ie. freshman/sophomore). To organize the groups, I have students fill out a notecard where they list their year, major, and describe their experience with the topic, social media content creation, and their interests in activism.

In groups, students reflect on their emotional experiences with the material and apply what they have learned to create microblog content. Their content takes the form of an Instagram carousel post that visually represents the facts surrounding the issue, demonstrates the impact of the violence, and offers solutions for intervention. Through this process students deepen their understanding of one aspect of gender-based violence through original research, reflection and group discussion. In addition, they learn to communicate persuasive visual and text-based content for social media to spread awareness and encourage change.

Once the social media content, visuals and text, are turned in, I take responsibility for posting the material on the class Instagram feed. I use a class Instagram feed so that students are not required to create an Instagram account and they are not required to put their names on the content. While many students are already engaged in social justice and activist content online, not all are comfortable with this public sharing on social media. Indeed, while social media can be an amazing tool for activism, it can also be its own source of violence and harassment (Chadha et al., 2020). The class account allows students to practice this type of activism without the personal risk of trolling. I also use the class Instagram account to share gender media examples and digital feminism content throughout the semester.

### **Assignment Expectations**

This assignment asks students to create a carousel Instagram post that includes visual elements, a caption, and hashtags. The detailed expectations include:

- Three original visual elements for your carousel post (photos and/or graphics)
  - Original graphics created on Canva or other graphic design program. You must use visual material that you have the legal right to share (original photos, sketches or designs, copyright-free images). Do NOT take someone else's Instagram graphic and repurpose it for this assignment. If you create a visual element using a quotation include attribution and citation. You can use other social media posts as inspiration, but you must create your own graphic using images with appropriate permission or attribution.
  - Create 1-2 visuals that set up the issue. Answer the following questions: What is the problem? What context do people need to understand the issue? Why is this a problem and who is it a problem for? These visuals may include statistics/charts/graphs.
  - Create 1-2 visuals related to your proposed action or solution. Let people know what they can do if they are concerned about the issue or if they want to get involved in prevention or solutions.
- Caption (approximately 100-150 words excluding hashtags)
  - Explain the problem related to gender-based violence. Expand on the answers to your thought questions for visuals 1-2. Be explicit about the emotional implications of learning about gender-based violence.
  - Propose a solution and describe how people can get involved. What can people do differently? What should they advocate for? Offer ideas that involve more than just donations (though that can be one idea).
  - Sources: Each team needs at least 3 sources to support the information in the visuals and/or captions. Sources can include reputable popular press publications including blogs, newspapers, legitimate surveys/data, academic journal articles or books.
- Hashtags
  - Include at least 5 relevant hashtags (#rapeculture, #streetharassment, #loveshouldnthurt, etc.). These should include several established hashtags that are already flagging your topic/issue. You can also create 1-2 unique hashtags that could inspire a new tag or digital campaign.

### **Debriefing**

Once all the content is posted to the class Instagram account, I encourage students to review all the posts and to comment on their peers' content from their personal Instagram accounts. During the following class we review the posts together and discuss what visual and textual elements we found compelling. As a 200-level class, this is an introduction for most students to think about visual design elements. We consider the different challenges and insights associated with the creative and logical aspects of the assignment. Students also reflect on issues that groups faced and how teams handled obstacles. These often fall into a few different categories including: selecting a topic the whole group felt good about, image logistics related to design and copyright-free imagery, evaluating source credibility, discovering relevant hashtags versus creating their own, coming up with ideas for action, and team dynamics.

Students often express how difficult it is to talk about a significant issue like gender-based violence in the short form of microblogging, especially on a public platform. This generates valuable contemplation about the opportunities and obstacles associated with discussing serious, emotional topics and activist content on social media. I encourage students to share the posts to their personal Instagram accounts. As a group we talk about why they choose to share or not, and any reactions they have received if they did share. We also address any concerns about comments on the posts. On occasion, there have been comments that are unproductive or unkind. I've never had any comments that were hostile. I give students the power to decide if they want to address, ignore, or delete a comment on their team's post. In contrast, the absence of comments or engagement can also be disappointing for students who worked hard on their content. This is another opportunity to consider how build traction in online activism and how to cope with limited responses.

### **Assessment**

I evaluate this assignment based on completeness and a general assessment of how informative and persuasive the post was. I look for a clear statement about the issue with evidence, useful visual content to convey data and evoke feeling, a clear action or recommendation, and relevant hashtags. As I do not provide instruction on visual design, I do not evaluate the quality of their visuals – beyond the clear expectation that they generate their own graphics and use legal art. That said, I am often impressed at the students' creativity and enthusiasm for creating visual representations of the issue in a way that invites emotional engagement with the topic. My evaluation aligns with expectations for a 200-level course taking on a challenging topic that is new for many students. My feedback is more focused on encouraging continued depth of reflection and consideration of moving toward action on issues they care about.

I also ask all students to provide peer feedback on group participation. In addition to evaluation of individual contributions, I find it useful to include group-focused questions and prompts such as: How well did your team discuss the issue? What were the groups' strengths and challenges? What emotional experiences did you share as a group? Describe your team communication.

The overarching goal is that this assignment be a jumping off point to demonstrate how student learning can carry beyond the classroom and to inspire ongoing engagement with microblogging as digital activism. Additionally, the assignment offers an opportunity for students to channel emotional reactions about gender inequity into productive action that can inspire activism toward gender justice.

### **References**

- Baer, H. (2016). Redoing feminism: Digital activism, body politics, and neoliberalism. *Feminist Media Studies*, 16(1), 17-34. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2015.1093070>
- Bauer, J., & Murray, M. (2018). “Leave your emotions at home”: Bereavement, organizational space, and professional identity. *Women’s Studies in Communication*, 41, 60-81. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07491409.2018.1424061>
- Blithe, S. & Bauer, J. (Eds.) (2022). *Badass feminist politics: Exploring the radical edges of feminist theory, communication, and activism*. Rutgers University Press.
- Chadha, K., Steiner, L., Vitak, J., & Ashktorab, Z. (2020). Women’s responses to online harassment. *International Journal of Communication*, 14(1), 239-257. <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/11683>.
- Doka, K. J. (2008). “Disenfranchised grief in historical and cultural perspective.” In M. S. Stroebe, R. O. Hansson, H. Schut, & W. Stroebe (Eds.), *Handbook of bereavement research and practice: Advances in theory and intervention* (pp. 223–240). American Psychological Association. <https://doi.org/10.1037/14498-011>
- Hazen, M. A. (2003). Societal and workplace responses to perinatal loss: Disenfranchised grief or healing connection. *Human Relations*, 56(2), 147–166. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726703056002889>
- Keller, J. (2012). Virtual feminisms. Information. *Communication & Society*, 15(2), 429-447. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2011.642890>
- Kirby, E. L., Golden, A. G., Medved, C. E., Jorgenson, J., & Buzzanell, P. M. (2003). An organizational communication challenge to the discourse of work and family research: From problematics to empowerment. *Communication Yearbook*, 27(1), 1–43.
- Kessler, D., & Kübler-Ross, E. (2014). *On grief and grieving: Finding the meaning of grief through the five stages of loss*. Scribner.
- Kulbaga, T. A. & Spencer, L. G. (2022). Outrage epistemology: Affective excess as a way of knowing in feminist scholarship. *Women’s Studies in Communication*, 45(2), 273-291, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07491409.2021.1926032>
- Lawson, C. E. (2022) Harnessing your feminist rage: A multimedia assignment for upper-level courses. *Feminist Pedagogy*, 2(4). <https://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/feministpedagogy/vol2/iss4/2>
- Linabery, J. R., Corple, D. J., & Cooky, C. (2019). Feminist activism in digital space: Postfeminist contradictions in #WhyIStayed. *New Media & Society*, 22(10), 1827-1848. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444819884635>

Lorde, A. (1997). The uses of anger. *Women's Studies Quarterly*, 25(1/2), 278–85.  
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/40005441>