

ETHICS AND ACTIVISM

Curricular Assignment



by **Spoma Jovanovic**
Professor, Communication Studies
University of North Carolina, Greensboro

Some people, maybe you, believe we need to reclaim our deeply held human values of equality, liberty, community, and respect that a democracy requires. Doing so often requires a call to action at the grassroots level, to work for our collective well-being and to end social inequalities where they persist. Government officials and processes are important to the functioning of our country, but the power of people working together is the root of democratic action and a fundamental right. Per the U.S. Constitution's First Amendment:

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.

Throughout history, people have launched direct actions for change to ensure equality, justice, fairness, and inclusion. For instance, it took nearly 100 years of conversations, protests, and lobbying efforts, but finally women achieved the right to vote in 1920. Carpenters in Philadelphia back in 1791 first raised the issue of the need to limit the workday to 8 hours and by 1937, that goal was signed into law. The Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s and 60s brought sweeping changes for racial equality. High school and college students were at the forefront of integrating lunch counters and then other public spaces. In 1990, people with disabilities cheered when the American Disabilities Act was signed into law to prevent unnecessary discrimination.

Activists and organizers labor to raise attention about issues generally affecting people who on their own do not hold much power. Combining voices, however, creates greater impact over time. Activism can be a powerful, invigorating, creative experience. It is fairly common to see activists cheering, laughing, and celebrating. The work can also be frustrating without quick fixes. Activists commonly feel a sense of moral outrage when the changes they see necessary are slow in coming.

In this activity, you'll increase your *knowledge* by thinking about:

- What injustices persist in your community, state, country, and world?
- Who in your community is working to confront these injustices?

You'll have an opportunity to learn skills by considering:

- What writing and speaking strategies and skills do activists use?
- How is activism part of the tool kit of ethical civic engagement actions?

You can consider your own *values* and that of others by asking:

- What ethical values drive activists?
- What same or different values are important to you in responding to injustices?

Putting what you learn into *action* means asking:

- What kinds of messages and actions do activists rely upon to create change?
- What other forms of expression and action could they use?
- What are the pros and cons of each?

The Activity

Even if you have never signed a petition, you can learn a lot about activism, and yourself, by joining with others, and/or observing activists' work.

Part I: Attend a march or protest (or other direct action such as a letter-writing drive, canvassing event, or political campaign). The key for you is to be in the presence of activists to learn what is happening, what the activists know that you do not, and reflect on the meaning and impact and activist actions. Ask questions, even if that may feel uncomfortable at first. Keep in mind, activists will be eager to talk with you. Plan on spending at least one hour at your event and be prepared to spend more time, depending on the action. If there are speakers, stay and listen to them. Look carefully at what else is happening around you.

Part II: Write a 750-1000-word analysis by first spending some time thinking about how the action you attended connects to your course readings, classroom discussions, and your own values. Remember, you will have met people who are passionate about correcting injustices, people who have grit and determination. Consider what values drive them in their struggle for justice and how they respond to setbacks.

Tips for organizing your paper:

1. Use the introduction to feature a short story, observation, or personal reflection that highlights the main thing you learned about ethics and activism.
2. Provide details of the event/action. You may want to talk about the location and why it may have been chosen for this action. As you consider the many messages you saw (on signs and from talk), see if you can distill them into a theme or two. Who was at this direct action? Young people? Old? Both? Races? Genders? If you went with a classmate, do you think that had an impact on how you acted and what you saw? How so or not?

Ethics and Activism

3. Tell us about what you learned in your conversation(s) with activists. How did their values push you to think about your own? What was inspiring or disappointing to you and why?
4. How was the protest you attended (or other direct action) part of a larger set of actions? Sum up how you see ethics and activism operating best together.
5. Include two or more meaningful references to course readings.
6. Include a photograph of you at the event.

For Instructors:

Rationale

Attending a march or protest is a fundamental democratic right “of the people” per the First Amendment to the constitution. Here, students will witness and/or participate with others who engage in activism to learn what motivates them to pursue justice.

Objectives:

1. Learn what ethics and values drive people to become activists.
2. Identify what injustices exist within the community, how people are responding, and what organizations are involved in creating change.
3. Determine the skills and messages activists rely on to advance their cause.
4. Introduce activism as a civic engagement strategy.
5. For students to reflect on their values and commitments to addressing injustice.

Preparing Students for This Activity:

1. By way of introduction, you may find it useful to show videos of recent protests and marches in their communities or around the world (see CNN Reports video).
2. Students may need help locating protests and other direct actions in the community. You can provide a list of opportunities or create an additional assignment for students to research what events are planned, and then post to an online document for sharing with the entire class.
3. To help prepare students to observe and write for this assignment, you may want to spend 30-45 minutes practicing field note taking. Simple ways to do this include showing a video (maybe of a past protest) and asking students to record facts and impressions then write a summary paragraph/story to share in class.

Discussion Questions

In advance of the assignment:

1. Ask students to provide a one or two-word response to “Activism” and post those on the board. Probe for what ethical values students see underlying the words they shared (ex: tree hugger→commitment; troublemaker→lack of respect for authority; protester→impulsive; change maker→justice).
2. What are historical examples of direct action used to advance social change?
3. What hopes, concerns, and questions do you have about observing or participating?
4. What role do you think you will take—observer or participant—and why?
5. What is your current view of protestors, marchers, and activists? Do their actions work, in your mind, or are their tactics outdated?

Following the completion of the assignment:

1. What was it like to attend a direct-action event? Was this the students’ first time? If so, did the experience match their expectations? If this was not the first time, how did this event compare to others they have attended?
2. What ethics/values were evident in chants and conversations? Equality, justice, fairness, and inclusion are common themes historically at the center of direct-action events. Did students see people come together for these reasons? How could they tell? What does that say about the current state of our world?
3. How do the students’ experiences with protests and other actions connect to other historical events to address the same or similar concern?
4. What were the people like who were involved with the direct action? Were they angry, hopeful, happy, sad? What might contribute to those feelings?
5. What other actions could we, as a society, implement to create the change requested by the direct action the students witnessed?

Time Required

To Set up the Assignment:

- 30 minutes to explain assignment, connect historical context, and questions.
- OPTIONAL: 30-45 minutes to practice ethnographic observation and writing.

After the Assignment and Paper are Completed:

- 45 minutes for follow-up discussion and sharing of students’ experiences.

Ethics and Activism

Class Size

This assignment can be adapted to any class size. Discussion with the whole is best with class sizes of 30 or less. Larger classes would benefit from discussions organized into small groups after instructions and viewing of videos are offered.

Alternative Assignment

Choose one of the protests featured in CNN's 2019: A year of major protests and ask students to find 3 additional sources, including a combination of video and credible articles, as research, and complete the writing assignment.

Suggested Readings/Videos:

- CNN Report (2019). 2019: A year of major protests. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oHJ5MLPhWBs> (6.59).
- Drew, C. (2020). 5 principles of “thick description.” Available at <https://helpfulprofessor.com/thick-description/>
- Hessel, S. & Morin, E. (2019). *The path to hope*. A. Shugaar, Trans. New York: The Other Press.
- Jovanovic, S. (2019). Communication, dialogue, and student activism. In J. L. DeVitis & Pietro A. Sasso (Eds.), *Student activism in the academy: Its struggles and promise*. Gorham, ME: Myers Education Press.
- Jovanovic, S. (2014). The ethics of teaching communication activism. In L. R. Frey & D. L. Palmer (Eds.), *Teaching communication activism: Communication education for social justice* (pp. 105-138). New York, NY: Hampton Press.