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Digital Waves: Communicating Feminist Movements

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Cover Page Footnote

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Digital Waves: Communicating Feminist Movements

INTRODUCTION

Online learning provides opportunities for pedagogical growth and innovation. When tasked with teaching an undergraduate Gender and Communication class during a virtual semester (amid the COVID-19 pandemic), I sought ways to engage students through online technologies rather than working against or despite them. The Digital Waves (DW) assignment, one that asks students to research and then create digital representations of a particular “wave” of feminism, was one of several strategies I adopted; it quickly evolved into a favorite.

As a Canadian familiar with both Canadian and U.S. American contexts, I was working toward creative and efficient ways to introduce undergraduates to history/ies of feminist movements within North America. I approach instruction of gender and communication from a critical perspective, grounded in (but not focused entirely on) feminist theories and social movements. I have found that students benefit from some knowledge of feminisms, even when course goals are related more specifically to communicative and performative theories of gender. In other words, rather than attempting to “cover” feminist histories in a comprehensive way, I aim to introduce students to feminist theories and social movements as a foundation for the rest of their learning in the course.

I have used the DW assignment in my small Gender and Communication class (of approximately twenty students) taught virtually via Microsoft Teams at my Canadian university. The course is an upper-level Communication course populated by Communication Studies majors and minors, Women and Gender Studies minors, and students seeking elective credit. With adaptation, I could envision DW working in courses that feature feminism(s) / feminist theories; feminist philosophy; women’s / LGBTQIA2S+ histories and/or movements; queer theory; social movements more generally; and/or media criticism and history. In what follows, I relay my thinking in creating the assignment; outline learning objectives; explain how the assignment unfolds, can be debriefed, and assessed, and share some parting advice for instructors hoping to implement DW.

RATIONALE

The goal of DW is for students to gain an understanding of feminist movement(s) through crafting their own visual and verbal representations of key messages from throughout North American feminist movement histories. Rather than assigning essays or chapters, delivering (a) lecture(s), or requiring a traditional essay, this approach aligns with principles of experiential learning, an educational

process “in which educators purposefully engage with learners in direct experience and focused reflection in order to increase knowledge, develop skills, clarify values, and develop people's capacity to contribute to their communities” (AEE, 2022).

The “wave metaphor” is a contentious idea for feminist pedagogues. Simultaneously problematic and persistent, it is justifiably critiqued and yet annoyingly useful as a heuristic and shorthand when discussing the history of feminist movements. Jo Reger (2017) summarizes some critiques of a wave theory of feminist history, suggesting that it encourages presentism, is historically reductive, is a largely academic (rather than activist) creation, is whitewashed, presents all change as linear and forward moving, is a mostly Western perspective, and more (201). At the same time, as Reger discovered when interviewing U.S. feminists, we often use waves to locate ourselves within time and in connection to feminist history, even when we know that it leaves people, events, and ideas out. As they state, “...the commonly accepted trope of the wave serves as a discursive legacy that locates contemporary feminists in history” (219).

With DW, I have thus far chosen to maintain the “waves” as categories of feminist histories (i.e., describing movements and ideas as first, second, third, and fourth wave), balancing the resilience of the metaphor with discussion of critiques throughout the assignment process. Interestingly, students’ crafted messages—that is, the representations they create—have themselves served to critique the wave metaphor by blurring boundaries and highlighting similarities rather than differences. Instructors could approach this assignment without ever using the wave metaphor, however, by dividing feminist movement histories in any number of other ways (assigning groups to craft messaging based on specific eras, regions, standpoints, organizations, groups, theories, events). By asking students to investigate aspects of feminist movement(s), thematize and critique the messages they find, agree upon key discourses and meanings to highlight, and then craft messaging of their own, DW allows for an experiential introduction to feminist histories. One of the principles of experiential education is that it motivates learners to be “actively engaged in posing questions, investigating, experimenting, being curious, solving problems, assuming responsibility, being creative, and constructing meaning” (AEE, 2002). My hope is that students will take the lessons learned through the assignment into the rest of the course and out into their lives.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Following Linder’s (2020) advice, I craft both course goals and learning objectives for my courses. This assignment is particularly related to the following Course Goals and Objectives:

| Course Goal (To be achieved by term's end) | Objectives (Specific competencies) |
|--|--|
| Students will know and understand theories of gender, sexuality, and communication as used within various sub-disciplinary domains of communication studies. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Summarize, compare, and contrast theories and models of gendered communication. • Identify waves and theories of feminism as relevant to communication (studies). |
| Students will build a just and equitable classroom culture in accordance with feminist pedagogical approaches. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Outline some of the tenets of a feminist pedagogical approach. • Experiment with cooperative learning strategies that encourage equity. • Facilitate dialogue in respectful, inclusive, and equitable ways. • Collaborate with classmates to build a just culture of inquiry. |

EXPLANATION

DW requires students to work in small groups (of three or four) to create digital visual representations of an assigned element (hereafter, “wave”) of feminist movement(s). Students are asked to use course materials, along with primary/secondary research and popular sources, to research prevailing discourses of their assigned wave. Working together (though not always synchronously), group members attempt to understand the goals of feminist activists and writers working within this wave, critically question their messages in terms of foci, effectiveness, and context, and engage in perspective-taking. Throughout the process, I encourage groups to investigate messages from their perspectives in the present, with an eye toward intersectionality, but also (as best as possible) from the standpoint of those they are studying. As DW sets a foundation, I have assigned it within the first third of the course calendar and kept its point value relatively low (10-20%).

I provide students with a) an assignment prompt document with detailed instructions, b) readings, media, and resources about feminist histories from which to begin their work, and c) a channel in Microsoft Teams within which to meet, share documents and media, and maintain communication. (Resources can be provided in class and/or in the course LMS). Students can be grouped randomly by the instructor or group themselves. Once groups are established, I assign each group a particular wave of feminism. The only specific requirements are that the students collaborate to create and then share at least three images (collages, slides, memes, social media posts, etc.) that communicate messages reflecting the discourses they have come to associate, through research, with their assigned wave. I ask that they prepare some basic talking points about their process and images so they can informally present their work to the class.

Here is how I explain the goals, in the prompt:

Imagine that you are a group of feminists working in the assigned feminist wave. You're living in that time period, and you're facing the inequities and privileges of that time period (which, in the case of the 4th wave, is now). If you were going to picket, or protest, or demonstrate, or march, or post to social media, or take an ad out in the newspaper or on the radio championing your cause, what would your group say? What would the slogan(s) be? What might the imagery be? How would you communicate your message to the larger public?

Think about a) the language of your message, b) any imagery to include, c) the mediated form you'd like it to take, d) aesthetics (that is, how the whole message comes together visually), and e) the best available means of persuasion to get your message across.

Note: You don't have to limit yourself to the media available in the time period. If you'd like to make sample social media posts for first wave feminist messages, go for it! You won't make any of this public; it'll just be for sharing with the class!

In addition to these resources, I recommend devoting a portion of a class period to a lecture or lesson focused on historical context of feminist movements, as well as explanation of the assignment itself. Guidance and clarity are key to DW's success, particularly since students are flexing several learning muscles simultaneously to complete the project (group communication and negotiation skills, research acumen, critical thinking skills, media literacy, and design skills). Establishing some scaffolding or structure for collaboration and/or helping students choose roles within their groups allows them to begin their work with minimal confusion or disorganization.

In the Gender and Communication course I developed DW for, I give students several weeks to complete this assignment. In an online course, this means devoting some class time (15-30 minutes during several meetings) to student collaboration through breakout rooms or in-person groups. I encourage students to meet as often as necessary outside of class as well as to work asynchronously on their documents and designs.

Students submit their images by uploading them to the "General" channel on our course Teams page (any sharing platform could work). I also ask each group to submit their writing/talking points/reflections to the LMS for grading. We then

devote at least one full class period to sharing, discussing, and reflecting on each group's representations.

DEBRIEFING

I recommend scheduling at least one class period for a debriefing session. During this session, I ask students to review each set of representations for a few minutes, then provide each group time to share reflections and talking points on their own processes/finished products before discussing each wave with the class. The goals here are for students to informally teach about their assigned waves while also reflecting on gender and communication. I encourage them to focus on sharing what they see as the key message or focus of their wave. I encourage them to make connections, ask questions, and consider the variety and tone of messages attendant to feminist movement(s) throughout history. One of the benefits of the assignment is that, depending on students' messaging choices, different aspects of feminist history rise to the level of representation. This opens space for discussion not only about the discourses highlighted in each group's creations but about those the students sifted through and chose against as well. To share some examples, the first time using DW, the first wave groups focused on suffrage, while the third wave groups really aimed at choice and body positivity. Those assigned the fourth wave, while struggling the most, decided to focus on women in sport, crafting a PSA campaign.

For the students, this provides an opportunity to learn from one another about the communication strategies and "asks" of successive waves or moments from feminist histories. It casts them as the experts in relation to each wave and encourages them to lead our thinking throughout the session. In my experience, students are often proud of their representations; this in-class session affords them a chance to exhibit their work, hear feedback from peers, and relate feminist theories and strategies to their lives. The students lead the way.

While not strictly for assessment, this process also allows instructors some insight into students' thinking, process, and competence with a) the critical consumption of mediated messages, b) knowledge of feminist histories, and c) the production of mediated content. Students demonstrate, in real-time, their achievement of learning objectives. I take notes during this session, and where relevant or applicable, reference them in the more formal assessment of the project.

ASSESSMENT

Until now, I have assessed the projects using a general grading strategy (not a formal rubric) based on how well they have met the requirements of the assignment both as a group and individually. Students have a chance to provide

peer feedback for their groupmates through a Microsoft Form-based questionnaire, and each student earns a combined individual and group grade. In the future, I will likely convert the assignment prompt to a rubric with criteria focused on quality and accuracy of content; creativity and use of communication strategies; collaboration; and presentation of images and reflections.

Overall, I was impressed with the communication-focused discussions generated by this assignment, the engagement it encouraged with historical representations of feminist movement(s), and most importantly, the students' representations. I realized, perhaps more than ever, the ways our ever-changing pedagogical technologies allow for tapping the creative potential of undergraduate students. They used photography, design tools like PowerPoint and Canva, and their knowledge of memes and social media visual vocabulary to craft powerful, precise, and provocative representations of feminist history.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

I would encourage anyone implementing this assignment in the future to build, in the early days and weeks of their course, some infrastructure for collaboration and teamwork. This has presented the biggest challenge for my students, especially in an online environment. Assigning clear roles, providing class time for some project tasks, and outlining sample steps for students to follow are all potentially helpful strategies.

The more resources you provide, and the clearer the task, the more creative the students will be. Students may struggle more with some waves, eras, or concepts than others (i.e., the third and fourth waves require some theoretical clarity), so resources are essential. If desired, I could imagine benefits to building a public component into the creation and dissemination of representations (i.e., posting them to social media or on a university website)—this would have to be built into the structure from the start, with permissions and protections in place.

In closing, I have found in this assignment a creative and productive way to engage undergraduate students in collaborative, experiential learning about feminist history from a communication studies perspective. My students and I enjoy the discussions throughout the process and then move through the rest of the course with some shared knowledge of feminist movement history.

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