

Social Justice: A Definition and a Foundation

Overview

ENGL 2634: Writing and Social Justice is a course that utilizes technical writing to teach us about composition and design in the service of social justice work. In this project-based course, we will examine rhetorical principles in the service of social justice goals and experiment with modes of composition as we create texts centered on local (Appalachian) social justice issues.

The course asks us to engage with texts surrounding social justice issues; we will learn the characteristics of these texts in order to conduct informal rhetorical analyses of social justice rhetoric. Together, we'll learn how the 3 P's, positionality, privilege, and power, affect us and the position from which we do justice work. Finally, we'll use this knowledge to collaboratively create, review, and revise social justice texts of our own.

The course utilizes the following texts:

Watson, Rebecca, Kristen R. Moore and Natasha N. Jones. *Technical Communication After the Social Justice Turn: Building Coalitions for Action*. Routledge: New York, NY, 2019.

brown, a.m. and Walidah Imarisha, eds. *Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements*. AK Press: Oakland, CA, 2015.

Exercise Goals

- Crowdsource a definition of "social justice" to which we can continue referring throughout the semester using examples and class discussion.
- Create a Classroom Code of Conduct that exemplifies our definition of social justice.
- Create a Classroom Grade Guide that spells out the standards for success in the course.
- Model a writing project's process: brainstorming, drafting, feedback, revisions, "final" version.

Deliverables

1. Crowdsourced definition of social justice to utilize during the semester. Incorporate into LMS design.
2. Class Code of Conduct document. Incorporate into LMS design.
3. Class Grade Guide document. Incorporate into LMS design.

Lesson Plans (3 75-minute sessions)

Day 1

Introductions (30 minutes)¹

1. Welcome students to class; ask them to take out writing tools for a quick freewrite².
2. Students and professor have **5 minutes** to freewrite in response to the following questions:
 - a. What is your name? (what you want to be called in class)
 - b. Where are you from?
 - c. What motivated you to take a course on social justice?
3. Students (and professor) introduce themselves to one another. They can read their freewrites or just give the relevant details.

Course Information (15 minutes)³

This short presentation orients students to course basics. In it, I cover the following topics:

- Course Basics
 - Brief description
 - Course goals
 - Meeting times/places
 - Course texts
- Instructor Info
 - How to contact
 - Office hours/appointments
 - Email response policy
- LMS Intro
 - Canvas frontpage
 - How to use Modules
 - How to upload work
 - How to contact others
 - How to locate/open collaborative GDocs⁴ for cowriting (segue into next activity)

Definition Search (30 minutes)

Open Discussion (5 minutes)

Opening prompt: what is social justice?

¹ This course tops out at 22 students, so my calculations here are based on 5 minutes to freewrite, about 1 minute per person for introductions (23 minutes) plus a few extra minutes for cushion.

² Freewrite questions for these three class meetings are adapted from Felicia Rose Chavez, *The Antiracist Writing Workshop: How to Decolonize the Creative Classroom*.

³ This brief course information presentation is equivalent to going over the syllabus with students, framed as a [PechaKucha](#)-style presentation. Because this course utilizes ungrading methods, I leave discussion of grades until the third day of class.

⁴ VT utilizes the Canvas LMS and Google Drive technologies. Because Docs is integrated with Canvas, I use this as a simple solution for in-class cowriting. Fill in with your preference, or the technology that works best for you - the point is to have a place for students to collaborate and see their words on the page.

For the first five minutes of discussion, talk in general about the phrase “social justice.” Do we have any ideas about what it means to start? Where have we heard the phrase before? Who uses the phrase, and why? How does the phrase get used, about whom or what, and in what tones?

Record class insights on board.

Who? (10 minutes)

The next freewrite responds to the question “who does social justice?”

First, students should take 2-3 minutes to write down as many people as they can think of who *do* social justice. After students brainstorm their list, open discussion. Ask students who they chose, and why. Add to the insights on the board, recording not names, but *characteristics* that get at the idea of *how we do social justice*.

Written Definitions/Cowriting Brainstorm (15 minutes)

The final 15 minutes of discussion are devoted to finding written definitions of the term “social justice” that fit with the ideas we are developing. Here, students will find written definitions and paste them into the collaborative GDoc.

The purpose of this activity is *to collect as many written definitions as possible*. We’ll use the definitions for the next class session. Between class sessions, it’s my job to take a picture of the board and upload it to our document, so that we can retain a record of our discussion.

Day 2

Freewrite/Discussion (15 minutes)

Students and professor take 5 minutes to respond to the prompt “who inspires you to do social justice work? Why?”

Students and professor go around class and share. This is an activity intended both to take attendance for the day and to build community, so that we can begin to understand one another’s motivations for doing the work we’re undertaking.

Class Definition of Social Justice (30 minutes)

Give students a minute or two at the start of this activity to copy/paste any additional definitions of social justice that they haven’t put into the document yet.

(10-15 minutes) Divide document into 4 sections. Divide students into 4 roughly equal-sized groups (about 5-6 members per group). Each group will take a section of its own, and will be responsible for answering the following questions:

- What is similar about the definitions in your section? What is different?
- Where do you notice significant agreement between definitions? What about significant conflicts?

- Do any definitions give a source for their definition? Are there any references in common?

(10 minutes) Give each group time to discuss their findings; write insights on board.

(5 minutes) As a class, use the Google Doc to cowrite a definition of “social justice” that suits our findings. Note that, at any time, we can come back to our definition and amend or change it, so long as we all agree.

Code of Conduct Brainstorm (30 minutes)

Shift the conversation towards a consideration of how our definition of social justice should affect our *actions within the classroom*. Here, we begin a new brainstorming document.

(10 minutes) Examine some examples: Virginia Tech Principles of Community; VT Land and Labor Acknowledgement; Charter for Compassion. What do we think about these principles, and how they ask us to treat each other? What are they missing, if anything?

(20 minutes) How can we convert our definition of social justice into action? What would it look like to apply our definition of social justice to actions in the classroom? Make a list of actions we could do. Possible topics: behavior during class discussions; mediation and/or facilitation of conflicts; attendance and participation responsibilities; behavior during workshop activities.

By the end of class, we should have a list that comprises a draft of our Code of Conduct. We will briefly revise the document at the next class meeting, and then institute it as a behavioral code for class interactions.

Day 3

Freewrite (15 minutes)

Students and professor freewrite for 5 minutes on the prompt “What are your strengths as a writer/designer?”

Students and professor go around class and share. This is an activity intended both to take attendance for the day and to build community. This activity asks us to acknowledge our strengths, so that we can begin to understand our potential as writers for social justice.

Code of Conduct Revisions (15 minutes)

First, we revisit old business from the previous class session. We will pull up the Code of Conduct from last week, and go over it together. We will discuss whether we want to revise any wording, remove or add content, or rearrange content.

Once we have an agreement on the Code of Conduct, it will be formally instituted.

Class Grade Guide Brainstorm (45 minutes)

The final activity is for the class to work together to construct fair expectations for course success. I utilize ungrading approaches⁵ in my work, which means that students need to have an understanding of their own standards for work, in addition to my own. We work together to co-construct our responsibilities for the semester. We start with a fresh brainstorming document for this exercise.

I begin with this offering:

- **Responsive Communication:** It is my responsibility as the course instructor to be open to your concerns and questions, and to respond to them promptly. To this end, I will hold office hours twice a week (once physical [Wed, 1-2pm], once virtual [Mon, 11am-12pm]). If you cannot attend either of these “live” office hours, we can make a one-on-one appointment for a meeting that is in person, via Zoom, or via Discord. Further, I am generally available to answer emails every weekday (M-F) from 9am-5pm. During that window, you can generally expect a response within an hour or two. Response times will be longer on weekends and breaks.
- **Feedback Opportunities:** I follow a model of teaching called *ungrading*; for me, this translates to a focus on feedback over evaluation. Effective writing instruction does not depend on numerical or letter grades — in fact, there is plenty of evidence that grades don’t help us write better. Grades are a form of *extrinsic motivation*, meaning that you rely on the teacher to tell you what’s “good” and “bad” about your work, and you revise your work in order to receive a higher or better grade. Writing, however, involves a great deal of *intrinsic motivation*: the idea that you are doing something because *you* want to. Writers often receive a great deal of feedback on their work, but the truth is, it’s always up to the writer what to do with that feedback. To this end, my work in the course focuses on responding to your writing and design with feedback on how they worked for me as an audience member. I will also provide you with opportunities to receive feedback from your classmates, during workshop times. As the writer, **you should learn how to think of feedback as data**. By that, I mean that, ultimately, you will receive a number of responses to your work, but only you can decide how to respond. If a number of readers are confused by the same passage, perhaps you should consider revising, unless your goal is to confuse them. Giving you power over your own writerly decisions helps you understand how to write and create documents that are more effective for their intended purpose. I will never rank your work numerically. Rather, each assignment will be entered into the gradebook as “complete” or “incomplete.” At the end of the term, data about how many assignments you have completed will be available to you to assist in your self-evaluation memo.
- **Responsibility and Flexibility:** This course offers you opportunities to manage your own schedule, to write and create when it works best for you, and to turn in assignments at times that work best for you. This approach may sound “loose,” but it is centered on the idea that you are responsible for completing your work, and flexibility is guaranteed to

⁵ Reference *Ungrading: Why Rating Students Undermines Learning (and What to Do Instead)*, a collection edited by Susan D. Blum.

you, from me, as long as that work is completed. Together, we will work to determine how late assignments should be handled from this perspective.

Based on these tenets,

- What constitutes A-level performance in the course?
- What constitutes a failing grade in the course?
- How would the grades in between A and F develop based on that? What does a B mean? A C?

After class, I will assemble our work into a Class Grade Guide. It will detail all of the policies we have agreed to together, and outline our responsibilities as learners and instructors. Additionally, it will detail how students attain grades in the course.