Laurie E. Gries

Writing to Assemble Publics: Making Writing Activate, Making Writing Matter

In this article, I weave new materialist theories about assemblage, community, agency, and rhetorical responsibility to argue for pedagogies that foreground writing to assemble publics and offer direct rhetorical training in campaign organizing. In describing three student activist campaigns, I demonstrate how this pedagogy challenges students to create socio-material assemblages that entice bodies into collective action—a challenge that demands tactile agility, creative activism, and often metanoic revision.

November 3, 2014—A group of more than 100 Syracuse University students, most of whom were members of the newly-founded student organization THE General Body, marched to Crouse-Hinds Hall as part of the Diversity and Transparency Rally to deliver a 43-page list of grievances to the university administration. After initially finding the doors locked and being refused entry, nearly 50 students were eventually let in and allowed to occupy the lobby of Crouse-Hinds Hall to stage a sit-in. The protest would last 17 days and accompany five more rallies on campus by THE General Body during that time. It was the largest student activism movement at SU in more than a decade.

—Ari Gilberg, The NewsHouse

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November 9, 2015—Weeks of mounting pressure from students and faculty have resulted in University of Missouri system president’s Tim Wolfe’s resignation Monday morning. It was the ending that protesters called for, but their victory was not achieved without a long and difficult fight, during which one student nearly starved to death and the university almost lost its football team. Through it all, one group stood out for spearheading the campus-wide protests and drafting demands that are now being considered by the state’s top lawmakers. So who are the University of Missouri’s Concerned Student 1950? The activist group has led in the fight to end racial hostility in the institution.

—Alicia Lu, Bustle

March 22, 2017—At the University of New Mexico, students in the KIVA Club formed an activist group encouraging student and community involvement with Native American issues and events. President Demetrius Johnson said the KIVA Club has articulated 11 demands the group hopes UNM administration will implement. One demand—a proposal to abolish the school’s “insensitive” seal portraying a conquistador, frontiersman and a roadrunner—recently received positive feedback from the university’s president, who has since encouraged UNM faculty avoid using the seal until a new one is implemented.

—Casey Smith, USA Today College

In March of 2018, students from Stoneman Douglas High School captured the nation’s attention as they led a rhetorically charged demonstration to advocate for tighter gun control laws. While remarkable for its size and visibility, this enactment of student activism is not singular. Rather it is indicative of the rise in student activism that we see going on all across the country today. College campuses have especially become a hotbed for student activism. In fact, while college activism has a long-standing history in the United States, Time magazine reports that “It’s been half a century since we’ve seen U.S. colleges so roiled” (Dickey). As evidence for the rising interest in student activism, Time cites stories such as those in the epigraphs above that document the extraordinary efforts of college student groups such as THE General Body and Concerned Student 1950. Time also references the 2015 CIRP Freshman survey administered by the
Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) to collect information about incoming first-year college students. In one of many findings, HERI’s report indicates that first-year students’ expectations of participating in protests and demonstrations are the highest recorded since the survey began in 1967 (Dickey). In addition, HERI reports in the UCLA Newsroom that 39.8 percent of incoming students in 2015 claim they want to become community leaders while 22.3 percent hope to influence the political structure. Such statistical findings, among others, lead CIRP director Kevin Eagan to claim not only that student activism is experiencing a contemporary “revival” but also that student interest in political and community engagement is on the rise (HERI).

In tracing student activist efforts over the last five years, it is clear that college students are indeed organizing and assembling for a variety of causes via a variety of creative means. From individual protests, such as Emma Sulkowicz’s mattress performance project, to student organization–led demonstrations against racial injustice to national school walkouts protesting rising student debt, college students are taking activist measures into their own hands. Responses to such student-led efforts have been mixed. Many student activists whose demands have been at least partially met have received praise by officials, media, and communities. Other activist efforts have made Forbes annual top ten list of “ridiculous college protests” while others have triggered intense debate not only about the appropriateness of student activist strategies but also about educator response. For instance, at Reed College, a group of students organized under the name of “Reedies against Racism” are stirring debate for leading a longitudinal and multitactical protest against HUM 100, a course they claim is “Eurocentric at its core and should not be mandatory until it is reformed to reflect a wider range of cultures or abolished as the foundational course altogether.” One Reed College professor recently wrote a passionate op-ed for the Washington Post explaining how she felt such extreme intimidation by student activism that she experienced intense anxiety and loss of sleep. Interestingly, she did not solely blame students for tactics such as boycotting classes and interrupting class lectures; in fact, she argued, educators ought to think more carefully about their responsibility to teach students effective activism (Valdivia).

Such recent student activist efforts and responses ought to be of great interest to writing and rhetoric educators. On the one hand, we ought to be glad that students are feeling connected and emboldened to instigate local
change. In *The Civic Organization and the Digital Citizen*, Chris Wells argues that due to differentiated notions of civic expression and information style, many students today are experiencing *disconnect*, which he defines as “a set of circumstances in which young citizens and many of the democratic institutions that appeal to them speak different languages of civic life and communication” (5). The problem with disconnect, Wells notes, is that students often feel alienated from crucial structures of political and civic life as their opportunities for and desired ways to creatively participate are limited. The recent proliferation of student activism suggests that many students are finding ways to overcome such disconnectedness by instigating a variety of creative protests through their own rhetorical means—a phenomenon that ought to give teachers much hope. On the other hand, we might be concerned with where students are learning the rhetorical arts of activism and wonder, as Valdivia suggests, about our own responsibilities in teaching students effective civic organizing practices.

With the recent increase in writing studies majors across the country, we might especially ask how our advanced writing courses can better educate students in the *techne* of social activism. Assuming, as we should, that not all students feel prepared and confident to organize collective action, we might more particularly ask: what kind of direct rhetorical training can we offer to help students cultivate the rhetorical aptitudes necessary to respond effectively and responsibly to immediate campus and public events, advocate for their and others’ rights, and work toward a variety of self-identified goals?

In this article, I address this question by offering a pedagogical approach that puts student-led assemblage and activation of publics at the center of its curriculum. This pedagogy is similar to service learning curricula in that it offers students opportunities to collaborate with others to identify community-specific goals, generate writing and social action based on community needs, and reflect upon experiences working within a specific community (Deans 17). Ideally, like service learning pedagogies, this approach also helps students acquire transformative access—the ability to transform the lives of self and others through their use of and inclusion in “technologies and networks of power that help determine what they
become” (Banks 45). Yet, I worry that service learning pedagogies—which emerged, as Steve Parks notes, during rather politically calm times before the Iraq war—do not go far enough in helping students cultivate and negotiate the rhetorical responsibility involved in instigating and mobilizing collective action in our current sociopolitical moment. Most concernedly, service learning occurs within bureaucratic unions between university and already-established community partners in which administrators, teachers, and community leaders establish strategic objectives toward which students must work. In addition, community partners assume much of the rhetorical responsibility necessary to assemble ideas, materials, and bodies into collective action. Our students, while certainly handed minor responsibilities, have limited opportunities to take hold of the reins, identify their own organizational goals, and handle the rhetorical-ethical complexities that emerge through activist organizing.

In service learning projects, students also often miss opportunities to negotiate the day-to-day decision making that goes into civic organization—from adjusting activity systems in response to constantly shifting needs to responding to emergent issues that arise once writing enters into circulation.

The approach for which I advocate challenges students to take sole responsibility for inventing their own organizations, identifying their own community needs and organizational goals, and putting their own bodies and self-designed discourse into circulation in order to assemble a larger public around shared matters of concern. Such pedagogy builds on much of our current scaffolding to teach students the collaborative arts of rhetorical design, production, and delivery. However, this approach puts students in the hot seat, where in building their own collectives and implementing their own activist agendas, they become the organizers and drivers of rhetorical assemblage in every stage of the public writing process. If we think of service learning projects as writing with publics, we might call this pedagogical approach writing to assemble publics.

In what follows, I describe how my own pedagogy prioritizes writing to assemble publics by challenging students to invent social activist campaigns in response to self-identified concerns and to make small,
timely steps toward achieving campaign goals that can be implemented within a single semester. In forwarding this model, I align with advocates of activist pedagogy such as Seth Kahn and JongHwa Lee and Scott Sundvall and Katherine Fredlund as well as scholars such as Veronica House who advocate for embracing alternative methodologies for public writing pedagogies. I most directly respond to community writing scholar Steve Parks, who, in his work at the 2017 Thomas R. Watson symposium, advocated for developing pedagogies that offer more direct rhetorical training in building civic organizations that work toward advocacy, social justice, and activist change. This training, as Parks notes, requires knowing how to build an organization from the ground up, develop mission statements, seek and acquire funding, and establish working alliances with other partnerships. It also requires knowing how to distribute discourses strategically in and across digital and physical spaces, orchestrate activities and events that entice strangers into collective action, and negotiate the ethical complexities that come up all along the way. Most importantly, perhaps, it also requires understanding that communities are not already-established entities to be rhetorically impacted from the periphery but rather are assembled and reassembled from within—an ontological notion that situates students as one agent intermingling among others at the center of constant change.

In order to explicate the governing principles of this approach and their implications for student learning, I begin by weaving theories about assemblage, community, agency, and rhetorical responsibility—theories that are especially influenced by the scholarship of Bruno Latour and new materialists such as Manuel DeLanda, Karen Barad, and Jane Bennett. This new materialist framework recognizes not only that composition is an act of assemblage in and of itself but also that from an ontological perspective, community is a dynamic process of socio-material assemblage and reassemblage in which students must entangle themselves to play a vital part. In the latter half of this article, I discuss an upper-level writing course in which students put rhetorical assemblage to work by collaborating to invent, design, and implement social activist campaigns that respond to
shared matters of concern and seek to assemble local bodies into collective action. I specifically elucidate how students take their own creative measures to enact what Paula Mathieu calls “tactics of hope” in campaigns aiming to confront the prevalence of feral cats, Adderall abuse, and hetero-normativity on their local campus. In addition to taking full responsibility for assembling an organization from the ground up as well as assembling campaign materials and image events, these campaigns require tactical agility, creative activism and, often, metanoic revision, the latter of which demands transforming regret into productive learning moments and new rhetorical opportunities. I ultimately advocate, especially as we begin to expand writing studies majors, for developing capstone experiences that offer students more opportunities to connect their own needs for self-expression, preferences for communication, and ideas about civic appeal with the day-to-day complexities of campaign organizing so that they can generate effective and timely responses to issues of significance to them and their campus communities.

Assemblage, Agency, and Responsibility

Etymologically, since at least the fourteenth century, the verb assemble has been thought about in the transitive and intransitive sense; it has meant both to collect entities (bodies, words, things, etc.) into one place and to gather, that is, to meet or come together. In both these senses, rhetoric is and always has been about the act of assembling. If we look to ancient Mesopotamia, for instance, we can see the assemblage of signs and symbols carved into clay tablets, baked hard to preserve their legibility and communicability. If we look to ancient Greece, on the other hand, we find the ecclesia, the principal assembly in Athens where male citizens gathered to discuss and debate issues important to their community. Here in the contemporary United States, of course, the means of assembling can look very different than it did in such ancient cultures. But whether we are looking at the activist graffiti on urban street walls or listening to young female activists protest against Islamophobia, the act of assembling is obviously everywhere and everyday at play. Whether thinking about it as techne or in the more general sense as a socio-material force that reassembles collective life, then, we might actually think about rhetoric as the assembling of various entities that assemble bodies into collective action. Rhetoric is both constituted by and constitutive of constant assembling.
As evident in the recently published collection *Assembling Composition* edited by Kathleen Blake Yancey and Stephen J. McElroy, rhet/comp scholars have thought much about assemblage in relation to rhetorical design. Whether thought about as a mode of invention, a practice of remix, or multimodal composing strategy, assemblage commonly “refers to and sanctions the makingness that textuality affords and its use, reuse, and repurposing of materials, especially chunks of texts, in order to create something new” (Yancey and McElroy 4). As will become clear, such conception of assemblage is certainly at play when writing to assemble publics in that rhetorical production of campaign materials is always grounded in the (re)assemblage of various media, genres, and modes (pictures, words, fonts, colors, etc.) deemed most likely by students to catalyze public action. However, as Alex Reid demonstrates in his contributing chapter to *Assembling Composition*, assemblage is limited when we solely think about it in terms of textuality. Assemblage ought to also be understood in terms of ontology—as a phenomenon that takes place on multiple scales, among intermingling human and nonhuman entities, to constitute collective life.

Such ontological understanding about assemblage has important implications for students engaged in writing to assemble public pedagogies. First, it helps reinforce a new materialist understanding of rhetoric in which the act of composing is experienced as a collective world-making process—one in which students engage with a variety of people, technologies, materials, and environments, each with their own degrees of power and capacities for effectivity, to reassemble collective life. In a symmetrical sense, students move from thinking *I write* to the understanding that *we write*, with the acknowledgment that *we* here refers to, in Laura R. Micciche’s terms, “a merging of various forms of matter . . . in an activity not solely dependent on one’s control but made possible by elements that co-determine writing’s possibility” (498). During the composing act, in other words, an assemblage of bodies, technologies, materials, and so forth intra-act with students to produce various assemblages of texts, images, and other artifacts, themselves constituted by their own diverse assemblages. From an ontological perspective, composition is simply assemblage all the way down (see also Reid 31).

Second, an ontological understanding of assemblage helps reinforce the idea that assemblage is also, if you will, “all the way up.” As Manuel DeLanda elucidates in *A New Philosophy of Society*, collective life is con-
stituted by overlapping and interlocking assemblages—each composed of expressive and material components—that exist at different scales, yet always emerge from the assembly and intra-actions of smaller assemblages (18–19). People engaged in collective activity with other people and entities generate local organizations; intra-acting organizations give shape to townships and cities; intra-acting townships and cities organize the space (physical, political, socially imagined) in which states emerge, and so on. The configurations and identities of such assemblages are not static in that they are constantly territorializing and deterritorializing as participating actors come and go and as various forces, from both within and beyond, work to stabilize and destabilize them. Yet, even so, assemblages acquire rhetorical force, as they both respond to and impact other assemblages in which they come into relation. Such impact may be unpredictable, as the consequences of one assemblage’s impact can never be fully anticipated or controlled. But nonetheless, assemblages are both responsive and productive, and it is through such responsivity and productivity that collective life unfolds in a constant state of assemblage and reassemblage.

Such notions about assemblage are particularly important when writing to assemble publics in that from such perspective, students come to understand community as an emergent, unfolding phenomenon that is constantly assembling and reassembling as people with differentiating capacities and shifting ideologies, desires, and values intermingle in organized spaces with various entities that bring their own “thing-power” (Bennett 6) into the mix. Too often, as evident in some of our most commonly consulted dictionaries, we tend to think of community in an abstract sense, as an already-organized body of already-formed beings that share common values, beliefs, characteristics, desires, goals, and so forth. Theories of assemblage encourage us to push back on such static and homogenous conceptions, instead conceiving of community as always undergoing the process of assemblage and re-assemblage thanks to the ongoing activities of diverse, heterogeneous beings entangled in constant intra-action.6 Assemblage theories especially push us to think about community as collective action that does not simply unfold due to human participation alone but also due to the ongoing and shifting associations of actants—Bruno Latour’s non-anthropocentric term for signifying how humans are always entangled with technologies and other entities to modify the actions of others. Whether we look to the intra-actions of people, discourse, media,
software, and computers on social media or to the intra-actions of people, organizations, discourse, technologies, green spaces, and buildings in university settings, community is never something fixed in form. Community is a dynamic, organic assemblage constituted by both responsive and responding entities inter-animating in constant play.

Turning students on to such understanding of community is one way for them to begin imagining themselves as intricately involved in the complex assemblage of life. In order to take themselves seriously as responsible rhetorical beings, students must come to believe that they are viable agents in this complex, organic process—as citizens constantly assembling in response to various concerns but also as assembling beings—as rhetors with the ability to assemble and distribute discourse that can, in turn, assemble and reassemble bodies around a shared concern. As evident in the student activism at work around the country, some of our students clearly have already come to such realization as they achieve success in assembling bodies into collective action. More often than not, though, I suspect students see rhetoric as something that other people do out there in their communities to affect real change—whether those people are Black Lives Matter activists staging protests to confront systemic oppression or politicians constructing campaign slogans to win citizens’ votes. As Jacqueline Preston argues, assemblage theories help students experience writing as an activity “inherently connected to the realities in which students are already engaged” (52). Such experience is especially important in that in order to affect local change, students must first imagine themselves operating within dynamic and overlapping assemblages of socio-material activity in which they can and do play a vibrant and significant part.

Third, an ontological understanding of assemblage reinforces the idea that public life is constituted by various bodies assembling around shared matters of concern that are themselves assemblages constituted by conflicting beliefs, opinions, ideologies, interests, and histories of entanglements that can rarely be easily sorted through. As Latour draws on Martin
Heidegger to emphasize, matters of concern are complex entanglements that cannot be easily identified nor understood, especially as they are mediating, assembling, and gathering many more folds than can be easily detected (173). Matters of concern, then, are often divisive even when we least expect it. In one sense, matters of concern are divisive in that they are not fully agreed upon in terms of substance, cause, persistence, and consequentiality; they are thus always open to deliberation and dispute. In another sense, matters of concern often perpetuate divisions among people with disparate viewpoints or with different relations to such concern. As such, matters of concern demand careful consideration and negotiation of the multiple perspectives and historical entanglements that constitute a shared concern as well as the ethical complexities that accompany it. Such negotiations do not always come easy for students who may not anticipate the divisive nature of concerns that seem simple, straightforward, or obviously problematic to them. But rather than shielding students from having to tackle such negotiations, it is important to help students not only think deeply why such divisive matters might exist and may unexpectedly arise but also how to confront such divisive matters and lure people to assemble even if they do. Public assemblage, after all, often takes place not because people agree upon matters of concern but rather because they disagree. The challenge for students in writing to assemble publics, then, is less about persuading an audience of a given argument than it is about creating socio-material assemblages that entice bodies, if only temporarily, into collective action—a challenge that demands great responsibility and embodied knowledge that is best learned through engaged experience.

Fourth, but not last, an ontological notion of assemblage reinforces the idea that rhetorical agency is a distributed affair and that rhetorical responsibility demands mobilizing alliances in generative and ethically conscious ways. In one sense, rhetorical responsibility does not reside in student actions alone. Agency emerges from a dynamic dance of entities assembling in ongoing intra-actional performances during which all entities are constantly effecting and being effected (see Gries, 56–85). Within this never fixed assemblage, students are acting alongside a host of other human and nonhuman entities cooperating to catalyze change. The social media platforms in which they participate, the peers with which they collaborate, the materials and environments with which they engage—each contribute to and all are intertwined in making rhetoric unfold. Becoming

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a responsible rhetorical agent, then, entails, in part, learning how to mobilize alliances with various people, technologies, discourses, environments, and so forth to catalyze collective change. Yet rhetorical responsibility also demands taking responsibility for students’ own and other peoples’ ideas, desires, values, and commitments. As Marilyn Cooper explains, humans may not have free will in the sense of setting a conscious intention and causing intended effects to happen. Yet, human actions always have effects, and humans do have free will to consider other possibilities, opinions, and voices and to change their minds and courses of action in response to those considerations. Rhetorical responsibility thus demands acknowledging that rhetorical assemblage is often about human interface and response as well as invitation and consideration, especially since a public always assembles, if only temporarily, by people with their own “spaces of meaning” (Cooper 443) intermingling with other entities around a shared matter of concern. Rhetorical responsibility thus also demands that students acknowledge, respond to, and act in consideration of others toward a community goal.

Such sense of responsibility becomes especially important in writing to assemble publics in that when students’ assemblages, such as campaign materials, circulate and encounter people with differing beliefs, values, and commitments, they sometimes trigger unexpected consequences with ethical implications. Writing to assemble publics challenges students to think through such ethical dilemmas in order to encourage responsible rhetorical assemblage when instigating community change. All discourse, after all, is prone to rhetorical transformation—a process in which rhetoric unfolds in unpredictable, divergent, and inconsistent ways (Gries 27). Especially when students throw their assembled discourse into the public arena where a wide array of strangers may encounter it through social media, interpersonal communication, signage, and so on, the potential for unpredictable transformation and consequentiality is significant. Thus, as rhetors responsible for the design, production, and distribution of their own public discourse, students are pushed to think carefully in early stages of collective formation and invention not only about the messages they produce in the now but also their messages’ potentials for ethically problematic future uptake. While

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students cannot always control the ongoing life of their discourse, they can at least contemplate its rhetorical velocity,” anticipating how their discourse might affect those entities that it will and might encounter. They can also, especially with guidance, learn to negotiate ethical dilemmas that do arise as a consequence of their own discursive production and distribution. As Cooper asserts, “Rhetorical agency is a big responsibility. It means being responsible for oneself, for others, and for the common world we construct together” (443). Writing to assemble publics offers students opportunities to enact such responsibility as they work alongside other entities in a wide range of distributed activities to spark community change. As I demonstrate next, such rhetorical engagement especially entails entering into a distributed dance of agency that manifests in serious public performance and consequential discursive play.

**Classroom Cases in Point**

In “Becoming Rhetorical,” David Fleming advocates for developing pedagogies that recapture the political-ethical project to which classical rhetorical education was so committed. As Fleming argues, rather than teach students the highly elastic vocabulary of rhetorical theory toward trivial ends, classical rhetoricians provided a “training in civic discourse that has intellectual integrity but also practical effectivity and moral attracting” (94)—a training that cultivates “rhetorical consciousness” and “political rhetorical character” through “discursive play and serious performance” (107–9). While certainly not a pedagogy that Fleming had in mind, pedagogies that foreground writing to assemble publics can help students develop such political rhetorical character through discursive play and serious performance. This is especially the case if we offer students direct rhetorical training in building civic organizations of their own invention, a training that not only harnesses, in Mathieu’s terms, that “creative, competent, vibrant” part of our students’ souls (xix) but also demands rhetorical-ethical negotiation throughout the composing process.

As a means of rhetorical education, writing to assemble publics can obviously take on many forms in a given classroom. In my own teaching, such an approach has thus far manifested in challenging students to assemble and activate local publics around a chosen matter of concern through the invention and implementation of a social campaign. To give
you some sense of what such pedagogy entails, I spend the rest of this essay describing campaign activities that were implemented in a 4000-level undergraduate course I have taught several times in both English and communication departments at two different large public universities. In terms of course design, this curriculum was inspired by an eight-year case study of a single image’s multiple and diverse campaign activities, research that required paying close attention to how various groups deployed visual rhetoric, image events, and other creative tactics to accomplish a variety of campaign goals. This pedagogy was also inspired by Mathieu, who in *Tactics of Hope* advocates for approaching public writing tactically. A tactical approach entails developing small projects that address immediate and fluctuating local concerns with a critical disposition toward hope rather than approaching systemic, long-term problems with a certainty of resolve. “To hope,” Mathieu explains, “is to look critically at one’s present condition, assess what is missing, and then long for and work for a not-yet reality, a future anticipated. It is grounded in imaginative acts and projects, including art and writing, as vehicles for invoking a better future” (19). Mathieu, of course, advocates for developing pedagogies in which students work with an off-campus community to harness tactics of hope that respond to that community’s exigencies and goals, draw on that community’s creative competencies and expertise, and adapt to that community’s fluctuating rhythms of activity. In my classroom, students are challenged to think of themselves as intractably entangled within their own campus community and to generate tactics of hope by assembling their own collectives, mobilizing each other’s talents, skills, and creativity, and enlisting a multitude of other people and entities (technologies, materials, environments) to assemble around matters of concern that are of significance to them. By taking on more direct rhetorical responsibility for civic organization through such rhetorical assemblage, I believe that students have increased chances for witnessing, and thus coming to believe, how their own tactics of hope can indeed create local change.

By taking on more direct rhetorical responsibility for civic organization through such rhetorical assemblage, I believe that students have increased chances for witnessing, and thus coming to believe, how their own tactics of hope can indeed create local change.

To prepare students for such rhetorical experience, we begin the course by discussing how the circulation of discourse, the assemblage of bodies,
and the mobilization of actants are integral to public assemblage through the likes of Michael Warner, Henry Jenkins, Bruno Latour, and Jane Bennett. Through such readings, we come to understand publics as dynamic collectives of people intermingling with other entities around shared matters of concern that are activated and maintained by circulating discourses and organized events. To develop a theoretical and practical understanding of how to activate publics by assembling modes, media, and materials, we delve into visual semiotics, multimodality, rhetorical velocity, and graphic design; we consider contemporary debates over intellectual property, copyright, and fair use in relation to remix; and we analyze the rhetorical designs and genres at use in already-existing activist campaigns. To learn how to assemble bodies into collective action, we consider how discourse can be distributed in physical and online spaces to increase chances for circulation, visibility, and participatory interaction. We also pay close attention to how agency is harnessed through people’s creative intra-actions with a wide range of materials and technologies as we read about geosemiotics, creative activism, tactics (vs. strategies), and image events. To help students think through the various responsibilities that come with campaign activism, we zoom in on the ethical decisions that likely did or should have come into play in the rhetorical tactics deployed in other campaigns. We also discuss the notion of tactical agility, which, as E. Wayne Ross explains, requires constant response and adjustment to emerging situations.

Putting this knowledge into practice, students work in small teams throughout the entire semester to design their campaign and implement two or three tactics that will help them gain a hearing and elicit collective action. Students must, first and foremost, conduct research to learn about the complexity of factors, entities, and competing attitudes, opinions, and investments contributing to their chosen matter of concern, giving careful thought as to how they will frame this issue and appeal to students in light of research findings. They then must assemble their own organization from the ground up, a responsibility that entails inventing their organization’s name, mission, website, social network sites, and campaign materials. Next, in order to assemble other bodies into collective action, students must distribute campaign materials, put on image events, and design other creative tactics that demand entering into a distributed dance of agency with a wide range of entities and moving their own bodies alongside others in socio-material entanglements designed to attract public attention. In
addition, they must document their campaign process and collect evidence of public participation via photographs, videos, data analytics, and other means. At semester’s end, in order to showcase how they adopted a critical disposition toward hope in an attempt to instigate local change and reflect upon what they learned about rhetorical assemblage, students create and perform a TEDx Talk for a public audience.

Such rhetorical demands are admittedly multifarious for a single course, but rather than attempt to strategically resolve large-scale wicked problems such as climate change, students are challenged to focus on local matters of concern that can be tactically brought to attention within a given semester’s time—a task that does leave time to design, implement, and reflect on the inception of a social campaign. While students often choose matters of concern that we might anticipate such as sexual violence on campus, students also often identify less anticipated matters that they deem important to their campus community. One group concerned with the ubiquity of undergraduate stress, for instance, sought to help fellow students “practice safe stress” so that especially during crunch times such as midterms, students could harness the motivational power of stress but not be overwhelmed or paralyzed by it. Another group was concerned with how happiness is perpetuated as a normal state of being in undergraduate university life, a state of being this particular group of young men felt was both unattainable for themselves and others and not necessarily desirable. To my surprise, no matter the identified exigencies, students have been quite creative and innovative in their efforts to intervene in such local matters of concern. From mobilizing the student health center to post daily tips for handling stress on their digital announcement board to producing “crying maps” and online spaces to intermingle with other students who identify as unhappy (but not necessarily depressed), students have found rhetorically effective ways to garner attention and enlist others in their campaign mission within a given semester’s timeframe.

To give you a deeper sense of how students engage in rhetorical assemblage “all the way down” and “all the way up” as they design and implement their campaigns, I share anecdotes about three campaigns that I think are uniquely illustrative of how students are able to assemble discourse, materials, and events that succeed in assembling bodies around a shared matter of concern, if only for a short time. As becomes evident in the anecdote about
the Cat Comrades campaign, students are always encouraged to reach their rhetorical audience by designing effective campaign materials and mobilizing key alliances. But for various reasons, attracting attention, instigating dialogue, and enticing bodies into collective action often prove to be quite challenging. In anecdotes about the Let’s Talk Adderall and OwnUp campaigns, I thus show how students often turn to creative activism and, when necessary, metanoic revision to assemble bodies around their chosen matters of concern. In describing how students in the latter two cases instigate unique rhetorical assemblages and enact tactical agility along the way, I hope to highlight how pedagogies that foreground writing to assemble publics can help students not only generate productive tactics of hope but also negotiate the day-to-day complexities of rhetorical responsibility necessary for orchestrating effective civic organization. In discussing how students take on rhetorical-ethical concerns, I also hope to highlight the pedagogical value of writing to assemble publics in our efforts to provide a practical and morally affected and affecting undergraduate education.

Mobilizing Alliances through Rhetorical Design

When it comes to social campaigns, assembling effective rhetorical designs are key to branding a campaign, establishing a credible ethos, and attracting public attention, but mobilizing alliances is also key to rhetorical assemblage. Students thus work hard all semester to design and distribute campaign materials with consistent brand designs and compelling, informative messages as well as to enlist other people and entities in their mission. One group called the Cat Comrades, for instance, hoped to address a feral cat problem that existed on our campus and across our university town. One of the leading causes of the widespread feral cats, the Cat Comrades learned through pre-campaign research, is due to students adopting cats and then abandoning them when it comes time to move—a concern the Cat Comrades framed as “cat abandonment.” To address this matter, the Cat Comrades designed a campaign in which they hoped fellow students would be compelled to think about the ethics of cat abandonment as well as to adopt strategies for responsible pet care.
As part of their campaign tactics, the Cat Comrades assembled a public website and a number of campaign print ads that were clever in content and consistent in design. One ad, for instance, depicted, from behind, a cat tail hanging from a baby seat with a car driving away in the background. At the top of the campaign ad, which was mostly designed in black and white, the words, appearing in bright yellow font to match the cat tail, read, “You wouldn’t abandon your child.” Then, in the right-hand corner next to the cat tail and above the Cat Comrades logo and website address, it read, “The average life span of an abandoned cat is only two years.” In addition to posting these ads on their website, students hung them at strategic places on campus in order to lure students to their website. On this website, visitors would not only learn about the cat abandonment phenomenon and Cat Comrades’ mission but also strategies for effective pet care, information about local shelters and cat societies, and tips for finding cats new homes. To entice students into social action, the website also invited students to sign an online pledge, committing to never abandoning cats in the future.

In hopes of reaching as many students as possible, the Cat Comrades also assembled an educational flier, distributed it to student apartment complexes, and enlisted apartment managers in their mission. This flier offered a contingency plan and posed questions every resident should ask before adopting a cat. As graphic designer Alina Wheeler explains, organizations need to have a consistent brand identity that fuels recognition and builds a credible ethos. To build a brand identity, organizations must unify designs across a number of brand touchpoints such as social media, blogs, websites, and publications (3). The Cat Comrades thus made certain to include their logo and website address as well as match their flier’s typography, color palette, imagery, and sensory qualities with their campaign print ads and website design. They then went to the most student-populated complexes, where they informed apartment managers about their campaign, showed them their website, and asked if they (the students) could slide their fliers under apartment doors. Surprising to the Cat Comrades, the apartment managers were so enthused by their campaign and impressed by their assembled materials that most volunteered to distribute their fliers, with some going so far as to make extra copies to hand out to new and existing tenants. In assembling effective print and digital designs, embedding themselves in campus and off-campus environments, and mobilizing the alliance of apartment managers, the Cat Comrades, as you can imagine,
were quite excited to find success in generating socio-material assemblages to effectively reach their rhetorical audience. They especially came to value not only the long hours that they put into rhetorical assemblage and distribution but also the unexpected alliances that formed when they made efforts to enlist others in their campaign mission.

**Attracting Publics through Creative Activism**

While all student groups strive to create effective print and web designs, students are also encouraged to deploy creative tactics to assemble a participatory public. Such tactics are especially important in that on college campuses, students’ attention is always being vied for by a bombardment of signs that students tend to ignore. To entice other students into participatory social-material activities, many students thus choose to diversify their multimodal tactics and embrace guerrilla marketing—a nontraditional means of communication that relies heavily on creativity and surprise (Serazio 3). While often enacted to advertise a company brand or sell a product, guerrilla marketing tactics have also been taken up by activist organizations for creative activism. According to Silas F. Harrebye, creative activism is “a kind of media activism that facilitates the engagement of active citizens in temporary, strategically manufactured, transformative interventions in order to change society for the better” (25). Flash mobs, culture jamming, hacktivism, yarn bombing—all are available means of creative activism that are commonly deployed by activists to gain mass attention and trigger critical reflection. In writing to assemble publics, such tactics prove especially useful in generating a word-of-mouth buzz about a campaign and enticing strangers to social media platforms or websites where they can learn more information about that campaign as well as engage in public dialogue.

To address Adderall abuse on their college campus, for instance, one group of students formed the Let’s Talk Adderall campaign. At the onset, Let’s Talk Adderall thought about the ethical issues surrounding Adderall and thought about design and distribution tactics that might work well in light of such issues. They understood, for instance, that they could not
create a campaign that would judge, out, or condemn Adderall consumers on our college campus, especially since Adderall is commonly prescribed for students with learning disabilities. They also understood that it was unrealistic to expect students to stop taking the drug altogether, especially when “smart drugs” were becoming normalized not only on college campuses across the nation but also in cutting-edge entrepreneurial scenes such as Silicon Valley. In thinking through such complexities around this matter of concern, Let’s Talk Adderall thus decided that all they could hope for that semester was to start a dialogue about Adderall’s constant circulation and mass consumption on campus—a rhetorical move, they surmised, that would necessitate earning their fellow students’ trust by creating a nonthreatening space for students to share their stories, their concerns, and their own ideas for intervention. Let’s Talk Adderall, therefore, set out to get students talking by engaging in several acts of rhetorical play and performance.

First, Let’s Talk Adderall created a Facebook page on which they published surprising facts about Adderall, satirical memes jesting about Adderall consumption, and short films they created to trigger discussion about Adderall. For these documentary shorts, Let’s Talk Adderall enlisted students to talk about their Adderall habits, making sure the interviewed students remained anonymous. In these videos, students who admitted to taking Adderall on a regular basis articulated why they took this drug, how it made them feel, and sometimes, even if prescribed Adderall, how much shame they felt in taking it. As these students spoke openly about their Adderall consumption, the camera zoomed in on various body parts of those students to both ensure students’ faces were never revealed and to intensify the video’s rhetorical impact. In one video, we might see a nervous students’ foot shaking. In another, fidgeting hands. Such framing devices, Let’s Talk Adderall hoped, would not only encourage Adderall consumers to speak up but also help college-age viewers identify with their classmates and feel empathy for them rather than indignation.

In posting such videos and other discourse to Facebook, Let’s Talk Adderall was ultimately able to bring Adderall abuse out into the open and catalyze conversation about it. At first, however, assemblage on their Facebook page was slow, so Let’s Talk Adderall made a tactical adjustment by implementing a guerilla marketing tactic outside the main library on campus, a socio-material activity for which they gained written permission from
the library administration. This tactic entailed enlisting a gumball machine and setting it outside the main entrance of the library. In the glass globe of the machine where candy normally resides, Let’s Talk Adderall had placed empty capsules, constructed in the blue and white colors of Adderall. On the outside of the gumball machine, a sign read, “Adderall for a Quarter.” When students tried to get their “candy” from the machine, nothing came out, of course, but in small print just above the slot, the enticed students could read “Facebook ‘Let’s Talk Adderall’.” Such tactic seemed to work; according to Google Analytics, Let’s Talk Adderall received over four hundred hits on their Facebook page in the next twenty-four hours. In addition, Instagram photos of the gumball machine began circulating among university students. “Let’s Talk Adderall,” perhaps, did not persuade anyone to stop using Adderall by semester’s end, but their video assemblages and mobilization of a gumball machine sure got people talking. Such consequences assured campaign members that with more longstanding tactics of socio-material entanglement, their campaign would be able to successfully create more open dialogue about this important matter of concern.

**Embracing Metanoia to Assemble Publics**

As evident in both campaign activities above, it is important when writing to assemble publics to not only assemble and mobilize people, artifacts, technologies, and environments in order to entice bodies into collective action but also to leverage *kairos* in order to seize important moments of opportunity. Writing to assemble publics sometimes also entails metanoic revision to make the most of missed opportunities and regret. In her 2016 *CCC* article, Kelly A. Myers explains that metanoic revision entails “actively turning toward ‘missed opportunities’ with the goal of seeing and creating new ways to navigate content, context, opportunity, and time” (387). While regret often accompanies such revision, Myers insists that regret can be “an entry point that can lead to reorientation on both intellectual and emotional levels” (387). She thus encourages students to realize “the ways in which opportunity constantly changes shape in the lived experience of writing and revision” (387). Metanoic revision, Myers
argues, can especially help students transform regret into productive learning moments during the composing process.

Writing to assemble publics sometimes demands metanoic revision in that, on occasion, students’ rhetorical assemblages result in unpredictable ethical dilemmas. Such is especially the case when students choose to address matters of concern that are intensely divisive and ethically ambiguous. While some may argue that advanced undergraduate students have no business addressing such matters of concern due to educational inappropriateness, lack of preparedness, or potential to cause unintended harm, writing is always a risk-taking affair that demands constant negotiation. Furthermore, when students are given chances to practice rhetorical responsibility, they are more apt to hone the knowledges and practices needed to appropriately handle the sometimes difficult-to-manage ethics at play in writing to assemble publics. Rather than limit matters of concern that students can address in their campaigns, then, extensive guidance and productive strategies are offered to help students deal with unpredicted emergent dilemmas. Metanoic revision can especially help students confront, rather than shy away from, such dilemmas in order to sustain interest and entice participation in campaign events.

One student group, OwnUp, for instance, hoped to intervene in what they perceived to be a heteronormative campus environment, evidence of which existed for them in the emplacement of a large, looming sculpture of a white heterosexual couple dressed in ballroom attire dancing in a plaza on campus that they argued was designed to welcome and celebrate diversity. This sculpture was part of an installation project that aimed to encourage creative exchanges between the university and our town and to promote cultural arts on campus. But, as geosemiotics helps us understand, place shapes the meaning of discourse (see Scollon and Scollon), and according to OwnUp’s Facebook page, the statue’s presence in the plaza “suggests to . . . students and outsiders alike that [our college] values heteronormative, white, cisgendered relationships above all others.” Heteronormativity thus needed to be brought out into the open, OwnUp believed, in order to create a safe campus, a matter of concern that was especially important to OwnUp in that several acts of vandalism and violence had recently been committed against students and faculty who identify as LGBTQ.

In order to generate an image event to catalyze conversation about heteronormativity, OwnUp decided to hold a Queer Sadie Hawkins Dance
around the statue, and in order to gain as much visibility as possible, they decided to hold the dance at lunch time when they knew crowds of students would be passing through the plaza. As reported in two local papers that covered this image event, over forty people showed up to dance to a remix of Florence and the Machine’s “Shake It Out.” As students and others walked by, some simply paused to watch, some took photos, and some, such as myself, joined in the dance. Others participated in the event by offering responses to the question “What is Normal?” that was written on a large whiteboard displayed nearby. Some answers included: “An evolution in societal thinking,” “Queer sex,” “Love” (qtd. in Varn).

To lure fellow students to this event, OwnUp relied heavily on their Facebook event page, which they shared with over five hundred friends. To their surprise, not all their “friends” were pleased. In one post, for example, a friend claimed the event was not only outrageous but also bigoted and “hetero-phobic.” This claim led to a thread of 105 comments over a three-day period in which students from across campus and from multiple perspectives argued not only about the purpose of the event but also its appropriateness and necessity. As members of OwnUp witnessed the conversation unfold, they grew especially concerned that they had provoked an unproductive, if not highly problematic, conversation. They also wondered how this event could be so misconstrued. After consulting with me, OwnUp members decided to not jump immediately into the conversation thread, but instead to revisit their campaign materials to see how their discourse might have triggered such a divisive assemblage of responses. In reading over their website’s About page, they noticed that they had carefully explained that OwnUP assembled in direct response to a recent act of vandalism against a member of the LGBTQ community. “So,” they explain, “we started talking. To professors. To students. We took a survey. . . . We realized that what [our university] was saying and what they were doing were two very different things. We found the crux [to be] heteronormativity on our campus,” which they defined as an assumption that “men and women are opposites who should attract and that their roles in the gender sphere do not overlap.” They went on to explain that in their eyes, the sculpture was perpetuating heteronormative values; they were thus protesting heteronormativity on campus by holding the Queer Sadie Hawkins dance around the sculpture. But while such explanation was clear on their website, they realized that they assumed their “friends” would
naturally see their point about the statue, and thus they did not bother to include such detailed explanation on Facebook; nor did they explain that they were not advocating for the statue’s removal or artistic censorship but rather for more inclusivity on campus and awareness of how heteronormativity may be upheld unintentionally.

In an act of metanoic revision, then, OwnUp revised their Facebook event page, taking greater rhetorical care to clarify the image event’s exigence, purpose, and goals. They also reached out specifically to those who opposed the event, acknowledged what OwnUp felt caused the confusion, directed them to the revised event page, and invited them to dance. Surprising even to OwnUp, what started as a heated conversation ended with the original dissenter saying they’d be delighted to dance and well over three dozen students showing up to dance around the statue with an even larger crowd watching from the periphery. OwnUp may have missed an important opportunity along the way to adequately appeal to a disapproving audience, but they transformed that rhetorical experience into a productive learning moment for handling the ethical complexities of rhetorical assemblage.

**Conclusion**

In this article, I have tried to theoretically and descriptively account for what writing to assemble publics entails as a pedagogical approach. In doing so, I have attempted to show how pedagogies that foreground writing to assemble publics can help students entangle themselves in their local communities, engage with various materials, technologies, and environments, and enact activist rhetoric that can do all those things we hope it will do—mobilize alliances, assemble bodies, and incite participation. When local business people adopt our students’ educational literature and pass it out on their own accord, when four hundred people visit a Facebook page in a single day to learn about a social campaign, when over forty people show up in protest to dance around a sculpture, this is all evidence that, in entering into productive dances of agency and enacting creative tactics of hope, students are able to act as responsible political-ethical characters.
and arouse public engagement. How might we do even more to cultivate such rhetorical consciousness and rhetorical prowess in our upper-level writing classes?

In their spring 2016 update, the CCCC Committee on the Major in Writing and Rhetoric reports that with a current count of at least 141, the number of writing and rhetoric majors has doubled over the last decade. In light of the fact that such a surge runs parallel to the rising interest in student activism, the discipline of rhet/comp will need to keep inventing pedagogies that scaffold rhetorical education to best prepare our students for an active civic life. Service-learning pedagogies are important in that they help students team up with community partners to learn the collaborative arts of rhetoric; as such, I believe that service-learning pedagogies should be folded into any writing studies curricula. Writing to assemble publics, especially if conceived as a capstone experience, offers students opportunities to build on that knowledge and take on even more responsibility by implementing a community activist project of their own design. In his first public address since leaving the Oval Office, Barack Obama announced his commitment to work with young people in order to encourage “the next generation of leadership to take up the baton and to take their own crack at changing the world” (qtd. in Rhodan). The new writing and rhetoric majors popping up around the country are an excellent opportunity to join in Obama’s efforts, and writing to assemble publics is one practical, ethically charged, rhetorical ability that we can help students cultivate in order to help them (re)invent a robust, participatory democracy. As a composing practice, writing to assemble publics is a big rhetorical responsibility that demands effectual rhetorical designs, diverse socio-material entanglements, and deep sociopolitical-ethical considerations. Actions that often require tactical adjustment, creative activism, and metanoic revision to negotiate the unpredictable complexities of civic organization. While risky and often messy, advanced writing and rhetoric students ought to be prepared to take on such responsibility so that they can hone their abilities to effectively address matters of concern and activate local publics—two abilities that are key to maintaining a democracy dependent on citizen participation. In an
era of rising student activism, undertaking such responsibility is especially important so that students can come to believe that in making their writing activate, they can indeed make their writing matter. For what better goal might our pedagogies aim than helping cement such a sound belief in the power of public writing?

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**Notes**

1. See Biondi, Berta-Avila et al., Janda, and Lipset for useful histories of how U.S. college students have engaged in activism over the last century.

2. CIRP stands for the Cooperative Institutional Research Program at HERI. The 2015 CIRP Freshman Survey collected data from 140,000 full-time, first-year college students from around the country. For a report about all the findings from this survey see “The American Freshman: National Norms Fall, 2015,” https://heri.ucla.edu/monographs/TheAmericanFreshman2015.pdf.


4. New materialism, as I have defined elsewhere at length, can be understood as a critical inquiry rising up across the disciplines that seeks to better understand how reality is socially, materially, and discursively co-constituted as a variety of human bodies, nonhuman entities, energies, and practices come into unpredictable play. (See “Current Matters: An Introduction” in Gries, *Still Life with Rhetoric*.)

5. See Bennett’s discussion of assemblage and agency in *Vibrant Matter*, p. 33.

6. Intra-action is Barad’s neologism for signifying entanglements of ongoing performativity through which individuals become determinant and meaningful.

7. See Ridolfo and DeVoss for more on rhetorical velocity.


9. See de Certeau for more on the difference between strategies and tactics.
Image events are staged acts of protest intended to be picked up by the media to stir public debate (see Delicath and DeLuca).

10. All student quotes, references, campaign materials, etc., included in the following section are publicly available on student-generated blogs, websites, and social media sites. Some quotes may also derive from online news articles published about this student work.

**Works Cited**


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**Laurie E. Gries**

Laurie E. Gries is an assistant professor with a joint appointment in the Program for Writing and Rhetoric and the Department of Communication at the University of Colorado–Boulder. She is author of Still Life with Rhetoric: A New Materialist Approach for Visual Rhetorics, which won the 2016 Advancement of Knowledge and the 2016 Research Impact Award from CCCC. More recently, she has coedited Circulation, Writing, and Rhetoric (Utah State UP, 2018) and published in Rhetoric Society Quarterly and Kairos. She regularly teaches graduate courses in rhetoric and undergraduate classes in digital storytelling, public rhetorics, and advanced composition.