

Researching and Resisting

Incorporating Social Justice and Resistance in First-Year Writing Courses

Brande N. McCleese¹

¹ Elizabeth City State University

Abstract

Students are often clamoring for assignments that connect to real-life situations. This paper will highlight various projects assigned in my classes, including the midterm and minor writing submissions, which cover both modern and historical cases, student responses, and student feedback regarding the assignments, along with how and why I continue to incorporate the importance of resistance in my first-year writing courses as well as the role that exploring social justice continues to play in my pedagogy.

Introduction

As an educator at a storied HBCU, social justice and injustice, as well as rebellion and resistance, are large components of my classes. They are looming aspects of African American history, and incorporating them has invigorated my Composition I and II courses. As a result, teaching these elements in first-year writing courses has become somewhat of a requirement for me. I love to include a wide range of incidents and occurrences to show our students that, in many ways, young people their ages were a large part of the Civil Rights Movement and that, in many cases, freedom fighters were bred on the campuses of Historically Black Colleges and Universities. I do this by including readings on Nashville area HBCUs, which served as training grounds for many, including the Freedom Riders, The Greensboro Four, and Jesse Jackson from North Carolina A&T University, Wiley College's Medgar Evers, Morehouse College's Dr. Martin Luther King Jr, Alabama State University's Rosa Parks, and Howard University's Kwame Toure (Stokely Carmichael) among many others.

Introducing our student population to the importance and ever-growing relevance of social justice issues has become crucial, and with the case of Andrew Brown Jr.¹ occurring in our community during the spring of 2021, I found that more students than ever wanted to discuss these issues and explore their relevance. Even though this began as a pre-pandemic practice, it intensified during

¹ *Andrew Brown was murdered on April 21st, 2021, in Elizabeth City, North Carolina by Pasquotank County Sheriff deputies. His death led to Elizabeth City State University moving online for the remainder of the semester, national attention being brought to the city and the case, and protesting in the community.*

the protests in 2020, and we had numerous students who participated in protests during that time. Although I now include historical cases of social injustices, it started with one modern case before expanding.

Introducing Social Injustice Cases to First Year Writing Students

My past and current students will gladly tell you that if I see something that I think is interesting or that will intrigue them, it often becomes an assignment. Anything that catches my attention and that I think will get them engaged typically becomes an assignment. This includes both my first year writing courses and my upper-level English classes. I try to think of outside-the-box assignments because I like to encourage students to think and ensure that they are strengthening their voices. I like to give students a variety of options so that they aren't just creating essays; I allow them to create podcast episodes, vlogs, roundtable discussions, articles, obituaries/homegoing programs, books, and multimodal submissions. Most of all, I like to incorporate assignments that require research and for students to formulate their own opinions and thoughts about the subject and find a way to effectively share what they've learned.

When I returned to Elizabeth City State University in 2019, I spent a lot of time talking to students about social issues they encountered as well as things that interested them. Ultimately, I knew that I could implement assignments tied to real-world events based on those discussions and informal assessments, such as short responses and writings.

The responses received from those assignments altered the development and inclusion of assignments in future classes. It all began when I heard about the case of Rodney Reed, a man in Texas who was convicted of sexual assault and murder in 1997 and sentenced to death. Reed's case grabbed my attention because there was dissension regarding his conviction and there was another suspect who was not considered, the victim Stacy Stites' fiancé Jimmy Fennell. That night I developed an assignment that would require students to research the case on their own and then discuss it (with support/sources) in class and, later that week, to create a written submission on what they found, as well as their opinions about the validity of his conviction.

Through student responses to that assignment via in-class discussion and semester-ending responses and reflections, I found that an overwhelming number of students wanted to explore more cases like this one.

One of my classes that semester also viewed Netflix's *When They See Us* in groups outside of class and led in-class discussions based on what they learned. Students were excited to compare what they learned through research to what was portrayed in the series. Even with recent cases, I have found that students are taking more notes to share during discussion and to include in their submissions. They connected a desire to explore those wrongful convictions with areas that they wanted to continue to explore. And in spring 2020, as the midterm for my Composition II classes, we covered the case of Nathaniel Woods. Woods was an Alabama man convicted of triple murder in 2004. Although that case ended in Woods' execution, students were quick to let me know that they still appreciated learning about him and cases like this.

One of the upsides of these assignments was increased engagement. I had students who didn't really engage previously taking a stance or raising questions about these cases. This also led to livelier discussions, pulling some students out of their shells. In addition, it gave some struggling students insight into topics they could explore for their final exams. For example, I had a student who created a podcast based on driving while Black, a topic stemming from an in-class discussion.

At the end of each semester, my students complete a reflection assignment where they discuss their favorite assignment from class. In the semesters where I incorporated these real-world assignments, I received feedback that indicated that the assignments where we covered social injustices were among students' favorites. Overwhelmingly, I found that my students wanted more assignments like these. So, in the fall of 2021, I gave a Composition I class a group assignment on a few different cases. The assignment required that students create a presentation. That assignment forced me to alter the remaining coursework for the semester and led me to develop and theme my next Composition II classes Resistance, Rebellion, and Revolution.

Symposium Presentation

[HBCU Rhetoric Presentation.pptx](#)

Enacting Social Justice in the Composition Classroom

In this section, you will find an array of assignments that I've used, some of which were mentioned in the paper. Instructors can find an overview of the assignments and minimal instructions for what I

used initially to get students to research and create an initial response (for the midterm).

Rodney Reed

Below you will find the instructions for the Rodney Reed assignment that started it all:

Post your mini-argument on Rodney Reed here. Please make sure that it includes an introduction including your position, one body paragraph covering the topic, the counterargument, and a conclusion summarizing your opinion. Your mini-argument should also include in-text citations from any sites used for research, along with the proper MLA heading.

I also attached a source for students to use to get an overview of the case before embarking on their own research. The article was the one I found that initially intrigued me in the case: "[Texas Lawmakers Ask Gov. Greg Abbott to Stop Execution of Rodney Reed, Whose Guilt is Widely Doubted](#)" by Jolie McCullough (2019).

Nathaniel Woods

Below are the instructions for the Nathaniel Woods assignment:

In this class, I will never tell you what to believe (for the most part). I trust you to do your own research and make your own informed decisions.

If you took Comp I with me last semester, then you know that I love to throw social reform/justice assignments at you. The midterm will be one of those assignments.

You will write a three-four paragraph mini-essay in response to the following:

1. Google Nathaniel Woods
2. Research his alleged crime (the one he was executed for) and decide whether this was just (deserved) punishment. Write a brief biography of him and detail his crime and punishment. Then discuss your feelings on his sentence for the crime.
3. There is no wrong answer here. Your response should be based on your research and your opinion after gathering facts.
4. This submission should be in MLA format and feature a title and citations (your sources if used).

Below, you will find two sources that you can use to start your research:

<https://www.cnn.com/2020/03/06/us/nathaniel-woods-executed-reaction/index.html>

https://www.theroot.com/the-spectacular-assassination-of-nathaniel-woods-1842156170/amp#aoh=15837717468769&csi=1&referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com&_tf=From%20%251%245.

Research Summary

Lastly, this final assignment, a Research Summary, was from Spring 2024 and led to a larger assignment that required students to select a case to explore:

Review the list below. Select one of these cases to research. After you've selected your case, you will be required to create a paragraph (complete with MLA header and title) summarizing the case you selected and why you made that choice. Note: a paragraph in this class is seven to nine sentences.

1. Kalief Browder
2. The Exonerated Five (Central Park Five)
3. Ronnie Long
4. West Memphis Three (involves children)
5. Scottsboro Boys
6. Lena Baker

These assignments although all different require and encourage the same skill sets. Students need to be able to research the topics, question the social justice aspects, assess sources and materials, select visuals, analyze text to gauge what information is necessary, and to compile that information into a completed product.

Below are the options for last semester which, as always, allowed students to select their own topic and/or case to investigate. Students were provided with a series of options for the finished product, details, a list of both narrow and broad social justice topics, and an overview of the timeline.

Major Writing Assignment 1- Social Justice Exploration

We will spend the next two weeks working on your first large writing assignment for this class, the social justice exploration. Think of this as using last week's paragraph assignment as the foundation of what your future project will be. You can select your own topic, but you need to have one by Friday at the latest. We will spend this week working on selecting a topic, researching your topic, and deciding on your format. By next Wednesday, you should have a rough draft. Rough drafts are required no matter which format you choose. If you choose the video option, then I will accept an outline or script of what you plan to discuss.

If you need help with selecting a topic, I can help with that. Some broad social justice issues are: poverty, climate change, school shootings, racism, wars, refugee crises, domestic violence, and gender disparities.

Some more focused options would be specific cases of injustices, such as the George Floyd, Sandra Bland, Ahmaud Arbery, Arkansas Negro Industrial Boys School Fire, MOVE bombing, Atatiana Jefferson, Samantha Josephson, George Stinney Jr., LaTasha Harlins, and Adnan Syed cases. You can also expand on whatever subject you chose last week.

Social Justice Exploration.			
Genre	Format	Rhetorical Situation	Requirements
Social Justice Exploration <i>This assignment will require research like you did last week. You</i>	Video	You will record yourself discussing your selected topic and giving an overview of it before going into further detail.	This must be a minimum of five minutes in length and detail your selected case/issue. Must include visuals of selected topic.

<p><i>will need to use three credible sources (Wikipedia is not a credible source) to create your finished product and have them listed as Works Cited.</i></p>	<p>Social media (TikTok or Instagram)</p>	<p>Choose a social issue and create a series of slides that cover the issue/event and post it to social media. This must be posted to one of the listed forms of social media.</p>	<p>This submission must be at least six slides long and packed with information. It must contain visuals and your Works Cited must be attached on Blackboard. You will submit the link for your post and the Works Cited.</p>
	<p>Digital Poster</p>	<p>This should completely cover your topic; you will need visuals as well as details of the event. This cannot be a one page submission. It should be a minimum of three pages.</p>	<p>This should be packed with information and must be created using a template from Canva.com. If you'd prefer to create a physical poster, you must use a triptych (three-part) board.</p>
	<p>Book</p>	<p>For this option, you will be creating a physical product. Your book will cover your selected event. It must contain both words and visuals. It also must have a title.</p>	<p>This must contain a minimum of ten slides, including a cover with your title, name, and Works Cited (as your final page). You can use PowerPoint or Google Slides to create this, but the final version must be printed and stapled to receive a grade.</p>

The Results of Incorporating Social Justice Cases

The cases that I choose now vary; I often include civil rights cases from the past. These cases will include the murders of civil rights activists such as Mickey Schwerner, James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Medgar Evers, as well as the assassinations of Malcolm X, Martin Luther King Jr., John F. Kennedy, and Abraham Lincoln. I have also incorporated massacres and assassinations, including Tulsa, Rosewood and, more recently, the Orangeburg massacre, as well as the assassinations of Malcolm X, Tupac, and Martin Luther King Jr. Students also explored issues like the creation of Lake Lanier (Oscarville, Georgia) and Lake Martin (formerly Kowaliga, Alabama). Last fall, my Composition courses centered on Rosa Parks, The Greensboro Four, Medgar and Myrlie Evers, Steve Biko, Mamie Till-Mobley, Emmett Till, Breonna Taylor, George Stinney, Lena Baker, LaTasha Harlins, and Yusuf Hawkins.

Some cases listed above, such as Rosa Parks, The Greensboro Four, and Martin Luther King Jr, are cases that my students know about. However, many of them weren't aware that there was a time in our country, in the state where they attend school, where we would not have been able to learn together. Since some Southern HBCUs were the foundation for training the generation of leaders who stoked the Civil Rights movement in addition to many other shifts in American history, I felt that it was essential to expose students not just to those figures but also to individuals and cases that also shaped our nation and the way that young people can be integral in those moments.

Enhancing Assignments to Ensure Growth

In the years since, I have tweaked the ways that I implement social justice and injustice assignments, but they are always a part of my first-year writing courses (see. Sometimes, students will work in groups to compose a digital product. This requires them to select a topic/case, research, and put together a detailed submission with a Works Cited. Group work often presents its own problem, but in submissions like this, I encourage students to take the role that best reflects their skillset, whether that be researching, writing, selecting the template used, or gathering pictures and creating a Works Cited. Additionally, for these submissions, I offer a wide range of options for completing and submitting assignments and encourage students to create in the way that best serves their voice, their subject, and their audience. I've had students submit PowerPoint/Google Slides presentations, podcasts, YouTube videos, books, brochures, and infographics. I also had a student create a TikTok where she was part of the recreation of the walk on the Edmund Pettus bridge. She cataloged her time in Selma and shared how it felt for her to be in such a historic place. For me, encouraging the use of social media was something that I thought would be exciting and that, too, was based on me scrolling social media and seeing how some people use the mediums to educate as well as entertain. It is my hope that the variety in assignment options will spark creativity, and I hope that it makes students more excited to complete the assignments.

In creating these options and providing a wide variety of ever-changing cases each semester, I am exposing not just young Black and brown students to cases from America's (and other countries) past, but I'm also fulfilling my role at its most basic level. I am educating them about things that many of them have never been exposed to before. As an introduction to the assignment, I lead a discussion mentioning names and or events that are similar to the cases that we'll research. Sometimes, we'll even engage in group

discussions, and one of the questions that they're required to discuss is whether they've heard of the specific case that they're researching as a group. Another key aspect of these assignments is that students can connect with the people, time, and events to empathize as they learn. In many ways, these assignments cause students to put themselves in the positions of others and to see a world that they can't imagine. These assignments lead to discussions that cause students to spend classes discussing various points or things that stood out to them. Watching them gain knowledge and an excitement to share their newfound details astounds me each time.

Overall, incorporating these social justice cases and examples of resistance and rebellion into my first-year writing courses has strengthened my classes. The practice has allowed students to gain knowledge that they would otherwise miss, and it has made me a better professor. Students have become stronger researchers, and they've become more engaged. During discussions after the assignments, or even during the introduction of the assignment, students expressed interest or knowledge that has caused me to throw in additional assignments, such as an in-class viewing of *Time: The Kalief Browder Story*. I included the screening of that and *Till* as a way to enhance assignments that we would complete after viewing. Knowing that I want to implement new cases keeps me on my toes; it causes me to think ahead about what we'll cover during the semester and to look for resources to aid in students' acquisition of research and background on the cases. It has also made me more conscious of what I'm assigning and how I want students to respond. I give detailed instructions for each option and provide specifics of what needs to be covered. In this way, I'm trying to ensure that students submit detailed and informative finished products and that they succeed in the class.

About the Author

Brande N. McCleese is a professor, essayist, writer, and poet. She is currently a Visiting Assistant Professor of English at Elizabeth City State University in Elizabeth City, North Carolina. She also serves as Program Coordinator for the English Program and Director of the university's Center for Writing and Research. Her areas of research include: The Harlem Renaissance, Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes, Southern Black Women Authors, Toni Morrison, and Lucille Clifton. Brande is a board member of the Southern Humanities Council and serves as a consultant for The Girls Are Alwrite, a writing program/camp based in Charlottesville, Virginia.

© 2024, Brande N. McCleese. This article is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY). For more information, please visit creativecommons.org