

# **Forms of Activism: Thoughts on Presenting Social Justice Activism in a High School Classroom**

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I set out to write this paper, to compile this evidence and these stories and these resources, mostly for myself. I wanted to answer a question: how do we, as teachers, present activism to our frustrated and change-hungry students without telling them what to think about these complex issues? I ended up writing far more than I expected, and doing far more research than I anticipated. Now, though, I couldn't be happier with the compilation, because I finally feel like my students can hold me accountable when they ask about activism.

Hopefully we as teachers are able to maintain a space that is welcoming to students of all political ideologies. It is absolutely possible to educate students about activism while leaving them enough choice and resources to make up their own minds on what their values are, what's important enough to fight for, and how to fight for it.

## **Protest History: Past and Present**

The central focus here is on protest as a form of youth activism, mainly because that is the form that I hear about the most from my students. I will clarify for students that, while they are separate concepts, I use the terms "protest", "demonstration" and "march" interchangeably, with "protest" being the most prominent.

The history of youth protest has roots in acts of civil disobedience, and we can focus on one point in time specifically that was an apex of youth protest: 1968.

1968 was the year of the protest and the year of the barricade. Across the world, students were responding to the changes in government and power they were witnessing, and reacted to their limited control over these forces by coming together to protest, creating highly visible demonstrations and marching down the world's largest avenues to make their voices heard. Below are prominent examples that highlight protest methods, successes, and failures from this time.

Students in France saw worldwide attention when they shut down the Sorbonne in reaction to the closing of the Nanterre campus of the University of Paris after clashes between students and faculty. When these protests were met by heavy-handed tactics from Parisian authorities, more people in Paris came to the students' aid. Ultimately, the entire economy of France ground to a halt for about two months.

In the United States, college students all over the country held anti-war marches against the increasingly unpopular Vietnam war. Sit-ins became a headline-grabbing form of nonviolent protest, notably at Columbia University. The protests on that campus were spurred by two things: the university's plan to construct a gym in nearby Morningside Park, which would shove out its mostly black and latinx community through evictions and displacement, as well as Columbia's institutional affiliation with the IDA, a weapons research organization that supported the Vietnam War. What resulted was the creation of two groups: the majority-white majority-student Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and the black-majority, more community-involved Student Afro-American Society (SAS). While these two groups originally worked together, they separated at the demand of SAS leaders, who wanted to spearhead the demonstrations happening in Morningside Park. Their argument was that since the SDS members weren't people of color and weren't part of the community, they wouldn't understand the needs of the anti-gym protesters, and their allyship wouldn't be helpful. The SDS followed the request, instead redirecting their own focus back to campus and anti-IDA demonstrations.

The protests began in earnest in April. The groups attempted to both draw attention to and inconvenience Columbia decision-makers. This included marches and gatherings from both student groups. In a now notorious motion, students from both organizations occupied Hamilton Hall, preventing the Dean of students from leaving his office. As the numbers of sit-in demonstrators grew, the students expanded their occupation to four other campus buildings, and presented a list of six clear demands, including an end to involvement with IDA and an end on gym construction. After a week without resolution, the university president, Greyson Kirk, authorized the forcible removal of all the occupiers. The violent clashes that resulted lead to hundreds of injuries and 712 student arrests. The well-documented treatment of students, through images seen around the country, helped to spread support for the students. As a result, students went on strike, effectively ending the semester early, and began hosting their own informal lessons, many of which were based on civil disobedience in its many forms.

Despite controversy and anti-student sentiment among many community members, these movements were largely successful. The president of the university resigned, and construction plans on the gym were permanently halted.

The student protests of 1968 were not always successful. In Poland, for example, students were among the citizens that reacted in protest to rising censorship, economic destabilization and dim future prospects in their country. Government dissidents began being arrested in large numbers, including those attempting to put on the play *Dziady*, which the government censored, fearing they were the butt of some joke within the play. Students in huge numbers rallied in support of those arrested, but were attacked by groups known as “worker squads”. These squads were most likely secret police in plainclothes. Thus began a vicious and dangerous cycle for the students: protests, fights and bludgeoning from the worker squads, then protests against the violence, then more fights. The cycle continued, leading to numerous injuries, as well as arrests and some disappearances. Finally, the government of Poland resorted to fear-mongering as a way to spread distrust and anger of the protesters: they began speaking about the protesters using anti-semitic and anti-intellectual rhetoric. The government dissolved entire academic departments at prominent Universities. Many of those targeted chose to leave the country, with the anti-semitic horror of WWII fresh in their minds. Thus, the protests fizzled, censorship and anti-intellectualism ramped up, and Poland slipped into a repressive communist regime that knew it could crush rebellion, and did many times, until democratic elections began in 1989.

If we look at the lasting effects of these protests, as well as some of their methods (how they chose allies, what their targets were, how the governments/power structures responded to them), we can most effectively teach our students not only the history of protest, but also how to both build and critique protests today. It is also vital that students know about some of the wonderful community organizers in our state who rely on demonstrations and marches to spread their messages: Winona LaDuke is one of the greatest Native protesters alive today in the post-AIM era, and her methods and messages are absolutely essential reading for Minnesota students. In addition to her, we have the nebulous organization Black Lives Matter, which has a large group of protesters and allies, especially in the city of Minneapolis. Their highly visible demonstrations, especially the shutdown of 35W in July of 2016 and the sit-in outside of Governor Dayton’s residence in August of that year, raised a lot of visibility for their group. These local examples should be a part of any lesson plan.

Modern prospective protesters should know this history; when you become an artist, it helps to study the masters, and this rich, global history of protests has its cultural touchstones. The most relevant and recent example of a massive-scale protest is the March For Our Lives, organized by student leadership from Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School. These students were spurred into action after their own school shooting; 7 minutes of rapid-fire ammunition caused the deaths of 17 students and staff members. The gunman had an AR-15 assault rifle, which undoubtedly contributed to the high death toll in a short time frame. It was this piece of information that students latched on to and rallied around with their message: ban these types of assault rifles to limit these kinds of attacks.

The students, admittedly fatigued by hearing about other school shootings over and over throughout their young lives, decided enough was enough. Student David Hogg, a survivor turned organizer, firmly asked for action. “We can say, yes, we’re going to do all these things, and thoughts and prayers. What we need more than that is action.” The students themselves decided to take action.

First, they captured news attention. They agreed to be interviewed, and cable news networks gobbled up this coverage. National networks followed, drawn in by passionate speeches, especially Emma Gonzales’ speech in February where she repeated, “We call BS.” Students, supported by members of their communities, began to organize in earnest.

What followed was plans for a walkout. On March 14th, nearly one million students walked out of class in support of the Parkland-organized and Women’s March-supported demonstration called the National School Walkout. Word was spread about this demonstration mainly through social media, marked with the hashtag #EnoughIsEnough. At this event, the student leaders in Parkland clarified an upcoming event, the March for Our Lives, in Washington DC. Immediately, support expanded for this protest, and sister marches in cities throughout the US went ahead with plans for similar protests.

The March for Our Lives began as a rally in front of the Capitol building on Pennsylvania Avenue, and quickly drew massive crowds, chanting slogans like “Hey hey NRA, how many kids will get killed today?” and “vote them out”. The students had strong support from famous figures, and celebrities like Paul McCartney, Amal and George Clooney, Common, and Ariana Grande marched with folks in Washington. Although there were many famous artists who performed during the event, the only people invited to speak were either students from Parkland or students directly affected by gun violence, for example, the brother of a student who died during the Sandy Hook shootings. This was done very intentionally; from the beginning the Parkland students wanted teens and young adults to be at the forefront of this movement, and they would either stand in defiance of adults or let them stand as allies. Students would always have the mic, and in this I see a parallel to the decision of Columbia’s SAS to differentiate themselves from the SDS. In the end, The event rivaled the 2017 Women’s March, the largest single-day protest in American history, and the sister marches around the country paralleled the activism in DC.

The next walkout on April 20th, backed by organizations like Indivisible, was again majority student-led, student-marketed and student-run, and again we saw the prominence of social media as a tool to spread information quickly and accurately. The students also emphasized the significance of the date; it was never hidden that April 20th, 2018 was the 19th anniversary of the Columbine shooting, the first mass shooting of my generation.

For this event, more nebulous than the March for Our Lives, organizers asked students nationally to wear orange for the day, and to leave class at 10:00 am and observe 13 minutes of silence, again tying the event to Columbine and its 13 victims. After that, students were able to decide what they wanted to do in their community. CNN estimated that students from over 2,500 schools participated.

Throughout their campaign, these students did many things right: they got national media attention and kept it on them. They disseminated information quickly and easily through social media. They made students the center of the movement, not adults, but allowed adults to be allies. They encouraged students to contact their representatives and attend town halls. Above all, their message stayed consistent: we need you to vote. This wasn't just commentary, they created voter registration drives nationally.

On the national level, student leaders called for local chapters of their movement; and many Minnesotan students latched onto this idea with vigor. When I asked teachers about the walkouts at their schools, I got very different answers. In the heart of Minneapolis, at Roosevelt High School, Katie told me that her administrators were continuously supportive of the demonstrations and walkouts, and that the school's involvement was student-driven. Many people were involved, so many in fact that students had to get a letter to NOT participate. She evaluates that the students and staff had a very positive experience with March for Our Lives and the student walkout. In St. Louis Park, Jill said her administration was a bit more by-the-book, making it clear that teachers couldn't leave to join marches and shouldn't create too much space in their classrooms for discussion (but she did anyway). When the walkout rolled around, she says that everyone but 5 students left to join. Among those 5, they declined to participate because they either had conservative leanings, disagreed with the protest or just wanted to get work done. Post-walkout, there was a lot of passion and excitement among attendees; she felt it engaged many students, and she was pleased that the walkout gave students a chance to speak and organize. Lastly, Molly, a teacher at Irondale in New Brighton, says that in the days after the Parkland shooting, there was a disorganized march that was student-lead, but many teachers and students just went on with their day-to-day plans with little discussion, which was not what she would have wanted as a teacher rooted in Social Justice education. This range in experiences is interesting, and although there are any number of possible factors leading to these differing outcomes, I have to speculate that when social justice is part of the curriculum across the board, and frequently taught and retaught like it is at Roosevelt, it is a determining factor in the level of student's involvement in local/national protests.

What has happened since the March for Our Lives? Well, unfortunately, more of the same, that is to say, next to nothing has happened at an institutional level to create the kind of political change these students have asked for. There is a proposed ban on bump stocks, which enabled some of the rapid-fire artillery seen at the Las Vegas shooting; Trump has said he's supporting this. But all in all, despite endorsements from politicians, celebrities and everyday folks, I find it's hard to point at strong examples of change. Students can, and should, argue with me on that: it was consciousness-raising, and perhaps it made them more hopeful that change is on the way. But is that enough? This gets us to the core of this idea about activism: what does it take for activism to create real change? Let's revisit that question later.

### **Resources for Students and Other Forms of Activism**

One resource that stands out is Unicorn Riot. Created in 2015 as a nonprofit, this left-leaning, decentralized alternative news source relies on a balance of on-the-scene reporters and extensive background research to inform its

readers. Reporters do everything from attend community comment sessions to film protests in the moment. Their reporters are oftentimes a part of the protest being filmed, and because of this (and its obvious bias) this is not the most reliable website to promote directly as a teacher (this would definitely fall into the category of “telling students what to think”, in my opinion). However, because of their extensive bank of interviews, videos and articles, it seriously stands out as a potential goldmine for the protest-ready student. I found their [recent coverage](#) of youth incarceration in Hennepin and Ramsey counties especially informative and impressive.

Their coverage of these community meetings presents another type of activism: local, community-based organization. For all the issues of injustice out there to care about, there are meetings to discuss how that form of injustice is impacting your community: proposals of city zoning plans, planning sessions to address housing shortages, or, like the above example, community-based responses to youth incarceration. This form of activism strikes me as the most grassroots of all the forms we’re looking at, simply because these meetings take place solely at the community level and for the benefit of the community. If a student is ready to learn more about any given social justice topic in their community, learn from or network with folks already doing the work, or make an impact statement of their own, knowing when and where these meetings are happening and showing up can be the start of something big for them.

Another form of activism that students may not be as familiar with is the boycott. They’re probably familiar with the Montgomery Bus Boycott (everyone seems to know the story of Rosa Parks, at least in part). This is an excellent jumping-off point for students, but without recent successful examples, the idea of a boycott would seem antiquated, best left in the 1960s. There are enumerable examples of modern-day boycotts, asking consumers to abstain from purchasing everything from Bluefin Tuna (called by Greenpeace) to the country of South Korea (seriously- there’s a list at [ethicalconsumer.org](http://ethicalconsumer.org) of most ongoing boycotts; it’s quite a list). We have historical examples, like the prominent work of UFW leaders Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta. One example I could see myself discussing with students is the recent informal boycott of Uber. The boycott started in part because of Uber’s picket-line-breaking tactics at the JFK airport in January of 2016, but continued when former Uber Engineer Susan Fowler accused a former manager of sexual harassment, leading to a former US Attorney General investigating the corporation’s practices and revealing damning evidence, evidence that pointed to a hostile, toxically sexist workplace. A boycott followed, mostly promoted through social media, and as a result the CEO of Uber lost his job, and massive changes were made to how the company deals with sexual harassment.

Boycotts could appeal to students because they’re just beginning to learn about their role as consumers in the economic marketplace. They may see how and where they choose to spend their money, based on moral pulls for social justice goals, could be a small but meaningful step. On his “Freakonomics” podcast, economist Stephen Dubner throws out example after example of boycotts in American history, pointing out, interestingly, that their effectiveness is hard to nail down, even in the case of the Montgomery Bus Boycott. He brings up the example of the Chick-Fil-A boycott, which was a reaction to the CEO’s statement against same sex marriage in 2012. Many supporters of equal marriage rights were disgusted, and called for a boycott of the chicken sandwich maker. However, there was a reaction to that: anti-gay consumers began to go to Chick-Fil-A in droves to show their support for the now-embattled CEO, in a move that was dubbed a “buycott”.

In this same podcast, Dubner brings up that economists agree the most influential boycotts are those that target a specific brand or company (like Uber, for example), which is absolutely something to bring up in lessons. Following that, in his conclusion, Dubner meditates on these examples, and draws some important inferences about the efficacy of boycotts. He states:

The typical boycott is more smoke than fire. And it doesn't often seem to financially hurt the targeted company. But, humans being human, and the court of public opinion working as it does, a boycott can color the reputation of a given firm. And a boycott, when it reflects dissatisfaction with a larger social issue, can become some wind in the sail. The way the Montgomery Bus Boycott did. The way that even — perhaps, *maybe*, who knows, maybe just a tiny bit — the Chick-fil-A boycott did.

The issue here, you'll remember, was same-sex marriage. The firm's CEO was against it. The boycott was in 2012. In 2015, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that same-sex marriage is a Constitutional right, and that every state in the U.S. must allow it. So, did the Chick-fil-A boycott generate noise that drove attention to the issue? Or, did the issue's preexisting momentum create an environment for the boycott to make a lot of noise?

What's the Chick-fil-A and what's the egg? We'll probably never know. But just because a question doesn't have a concrete answer doesn't mean it isn't worth asking.

Consequently, it's vital we address these grey areas when it comes to the effectiveness of activism in general, and using this example- boycotts- is an excellent way to spark that discussion.

On June 17th, 2015, Minneapolis blogger and activist Mike Spangenberg watched the news coverage of the Charleston church shooting with horror. A young white man, Dylann Roof, gunned down 9 black folks attending a prayer service. This act of white supremacy initiated for him the need for some local retaliation through the dismantling of Minneapolis' history of white supremacy. Spangenberg focused on one target: Lake Calhoun. Three days after the shooting, Spangenberg had posted a petition on change.org to change the name of the lake, taking away the notoriety of the Civil-war era white supremacist senator, and instead honoring the Lakota homeland in one small way.

Petitions seem like an outdated and sometimes inadequate form of activism. It takes a long time to collect enough signatures to cause any ripples, and there is a strong possibility of frequent, if not constant, rejection. But students need to see that petitions actually get things done, and we are so lucky to have that example of this close to home. Petitions are a helpful way for groups to mobilize around one single issue (something that is tricky in other forms of activism), and petitions can be taken very seriously by governmental bodies; if state senators see enough signatures from their districts, they'll pay attention. Spangenberg himself put it, "While changing the name of a lake will not, in itself, bring an end to injustice, it can and should be an important step in an ongoing effort to confront our nation's past and to end systemic racism and oppression today."

The example of the successful name change from Lake Calhoun to Bde Maka Ska (which was officially recognized by the U.S. Board on Geographic Names this summer) is one of many; students concerned with environmental justice would be happy to know that, in Arizona recently, a people-led campaign has created a ballot initiative to require 50% renewable energy in the state by 2030. This petition-turned-initiative, which was signed by 480,464 citizens, could result in an amendment in the state's constitution, solidifying a path for greener energy in Arizona.

There are more accessible forms of activism as well, requiring only a smartphone, a musician's ear or an artist's eye. Media activism, meaning activism through social media networks, an artistic medium, or other forms of political expression (ie podcasts), has definitely become a first step into the wide world of social justice activism and community

building. It's also relatively inexpensive and accessible timewise; retweeting information from a national activist who inspires you takes only seconds. But instead of focusing on social media, I want to focus briefly on artistic protest and creating political art. There is a rich history of political art; this in itself could be an evocative lesson plan. Protest posters and banners should absolutely be considered as part of this category. But I want to call out one artist in particular: Shepard Fairey. Fairey has been creating exciting and politically-charged art since the 1980s. His art depicts famous figures, like Angela Davis, Barack Obama, and his prolific portraits of Andre the Giant. Starting in the late 90s, his work began to take on more activist messages, and his street art turned into prints of juxtaposed symbols of peace and war in contrasting red and cream colors. There are numerous examples for students to see of this work, which only became more popular and political later into the Obama presidency. Finally, his set of three prints, a series called "We The People", was created in direct response to Trump's inauguration. These three prints need only to be shown to students for them to interpret the message; a woman in a hijab, a black child with their hair in twists, and a woman with a rose in her hair, all in tones of red, white and blue. This fantastic example of media activism shows that students can create something tangible and have it be an equally valid form of activism. Fairey himself puts this so well; in an interview with "The Creative Independent", he says,

If art can crystalize a complex idea in a relatable way, it can create important conversations. Many people feel like spectators in our democracy because they don't feel qualified to weigh in and they don't think their vote counts for much anyway. Images that can generate a conversation empower people to feel confident about their right to voice their opinion, which leads to a more meaningful understanding of how they can participate in Democracy and empower themselves.

The main critique of media activism is that it can create "armchair activists" or "slacktivists", meaning cultivating outrage but not enacting anything meaningful outside of one's social bubble. This, I believe, can be countered in teaching. If students are serious about change, and creating communities around enacting change, then they must "practice what they preach". Pointing out examples of the disadvantages of armchair activism, namely complacency and apathy, should be enough to deter the critiques against media activism.

The final example of forms of activism I'll present is volunteerism. Service takes different forms, but this final example needs to be presented aside these more visible, active forms because it deserves to be seen as an equally valid way to create change in a community. As students develop their values, which is absolutely happening in high school, they should know how equity plays a role in their community. One way to provide a service to one's community, to slow the inevitable cogs of inequity, and make little steps towards a better reality for all is volunteering. So many important services in our communities rely on volunteers. There are two places alone in our neighborhood of Steven's Square that depend on items being checked off their to-do lists by willing and reliable volunteers: St. Stephen's Human Services and Simpson Housing, both temporary shelters, always need volunteers. Volunteerism and activism should, in my mind, be presented together in one breath; if at least a conversation about volunteering might spur good discussion on long-term inequities in our schools' communities.

### **Thinking Big Picture; a Reflection**

Ok, let's return to our big, unanswered question I've been putting off til the conclusion of this paper.

Uh...I got nothing.

Ok that's not entirely true. What does it take for activism to be successful? In other words, what's the point of all this? I hope that these conversations make students less apathetic and less accepting of The Things They Cannot Change. Maybe this begins with a discussion as to how success is measured here. Is activism measured quantitatively, by participators or dollars raised? It is by airtime, or column inches? In daylights? In sunsets? In Midnights? In cups of coffee?

OPE! I got off track.

Is it instead qualitative (as if we could measure how consciousness is raised)?

I don't know. And I'm okay with that.

I want to take a page out of Elsworth's book and position myself here as a learner, admitting my understanding is only partial. I want to listen more and talk less, and throw questions at my students to which I have no good answer, and later reflect. And, much like Elsworth, I am becoming more and more comfortable with communicating to my students that, for some of these huge ideological topics, there *is* no answer, there *is* no guarantee of change, and there *is* no straight line to justice. We exist in the grey areas, and this is no exception.

My personal definition of success would be that, throughout the lessons that these discussions and this paper have birthed into being, I remain constantly aware of my *own* perspective. Whose activism am I inadvertently promoting? What examples am I giving? Do my students understand that activism is accessible to them all, that no one needs to remain apathetic to what's happening in the world around them? And lastly, and most importantly, did I help students see a way to move their own social justice work forward?

As Ladson-Billings puts it, this work needs to be sustaining, not simply performative. Students need to understand that I've given them a rough guidebook, they're the ones who have to take the next step, to use the tools provided and do their own research.

I'm fine with the uncomfortable, opaque unknowability of all this.

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