

Protest Song Projects in the (Post-)COVID Women's and Gender Studies Classroom

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The first time I play Nina Simone's version of "Strange Fruit" in my "Gender, Sexuality, Race, and Class in Popular Culture" course, most of my students are in awe to learn about how intricately music has been connected to social justice movements. Because of this crucial history, readings and conversations about the impact music has on us are a staple of the course. As a culmination of their analysis, I have asked students, for the past three years, to write and compose their own protest songs as a final project for the course. Groups of four or five students decide on a social justice issue connected to class (e.g., sexual harassment, the objectification of women's bodies, the male gaze, etc.) and do extensive research on their topic which they present to the class. Based on their research, they then reflect on the genre of their song as well as their intended audience and—with much class time set aside for this—write their own music and lyrics. Finally, they perform their songs live in class or to a wider university audience. I make it very clear to my students that no musical talent is needed to succeed with this assignment and that I do not consider musical quality when grading. Instead, what I focus on are the means by which students try to convey their social justice message. Despite many students' initial nervousness, the final projects are usually outstanding. One group, for example, created a *Hamilton*-inspired musical number on the sexual assault allegations against former president Trump.

When COVID forced our classes online in March 2020, and our university leadership expressed a preference for asynchronous instruction to accommodate students' oftentimes limited access to adequate technology, I decided to scratch the composition element of the project that semester and merely had groups focus on the research about their topics, accompanied by a musical collage of songs they perceived as supporting their feminist message. While students still enjoyed the intense engagement with music, the project in that semester's iteration did not have the same impact as before. Missing out on the challenging creative experiences of composing music and lyrics prevented students from fully appreciating the power of social justice communication and mobilization through protest songs. It became evident that I needed to enable the song creation aspect in some form during the next COVID-semester.

In fall 2020, I opted to go fully synchronous online via Zoom with all my classes as I saw this route as the most effective way to support my discussion-heavy and experiential learning-based pedagogy. As I had worried, both the students and I struggled in this new setting; it was much harder to create an ideally safe and brave space to facilitate the tough conversations for which the Women's and Gender Studies classroom is designed. Most of us, eventually, became more comfortable and our conversations deeper, but my anxieties about pulling off the song project virtually were high. I had envisioned the following adjustments to the assignment: We set

aside class time each week for groups to meet in Zoom breakout rooms to collaborate on the project; they received basic training in using song-writing apps, such as “GarageBand;” instead of presenting their songs live, groups recorded their music and created videos for their songs which they then shared privately or publicly—depending on their comfort level—on YouTube. It goes without saying that playing music videos was a different experience in class from having students perform in person; as such, the assignment mirrored our semester-long struggle of creating a close-knit community. Yet, the videos were fabulous in their own right. They certainly met the course’s learning outcomes, including a high level of connection between theory and practice as well as intersectional analysis of how identities shape feminist community action. In the end, my students’ feedback affirmed my satisfaction as many of them commented on how we still managed to create an interactive, supportive, and—importantly—enjoyable space.

Implementing my protest song assignment in the COVID-classroom showed me that, as much as experiential learning and creative problem-solving are valuable pedagogical tools, they still create burdens for some students. In my particular class setting, technology and the overall virtual environment negatively affected human interaction; but, with regard to the final song project, they also created benefits. Students seemed less nervous about the project in knowing that their final product was to be recorded and that they had more options for creative input. Under regular circumstances, my more introverted students tend to perform all the background research work which, at times, made them feel somewhat excluded. With the creation of the video, more students felt comfortable becoming part of the actual performance as they were able to record themselves on their own in their homes. As a result, I noticed a more equitable division of labor, which also led to less frustration shared with me about group work. Students’ pride in their work visibly increased, which—at least in some cases—led to students taking the project more seriously. Many shared their videos on their personal social media sites or those of student organizations, which enabled them to get feedback from and to engage in essential social justice conversation with people outside our classroom. This process turned into a wonderful practice opportunity to apply newly acquired knowledge to non-academic settings. Hence, this adapted iteration of the exercise actually fulfills the inherent purpose of protest songs more effectively than the previous version.

Naturally, the assignment remains imperfect, especially as it continues to overwhelm some students. But the benefits in terms of accessibility and inclusion, in my eyes, outweigh the persistent hurdles. So much so that, for now, I have decided to keep the virtual communication and video approach even when we return to complete in-person instruction in the fall. Live performances in the classroom will become an extra credit option of which I hope many groups will take advantage.