



Book Review & Resources

Social Movement Literacy: Syllabus

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The following syllabus is for a course on “social movement literacy” (SML). The basic purpose of SML is to help the general public become more proficient at reading and understanding the nature and function of social movements. From abolitionism and women’s suffrage to Black Lives Matter and Occupy Wall Street, social movements are invaluable contributors to our collective lives. But very few people—outside of activists and specialized academics—are properly educated about the histories, conditions, goals, tactics, and influences of social movements. SML is envisioned as an interdisciplinary, public pedagogy endeavor that brings together both scholars and activists in the attempt to create an open and flexible pedagogical agenda. The “learning outcomes” of SML are intended to be transferrable across movements—in other words, SML is not reducible to learning about a handful of specific social movements. Instead, SML establishes core skills and knowledges that enable people to recognize, discuss, perhaps participate in and, if need be, intelligently critique, the ideologies, political motivations, and tactics of social movements.

Personal background

I am an Associate Professor of Instruction at Temple University in the Department of Communication and Social Influence. I teach in the area of “rhetoric and public advocacy,” with an expertise in the theory and practice of social justice. I regularly teach courses on social movements and related topics (activism, community organizing, social change, etc.). I have also been directly involved with social movements for more than seventeen years, participating in the global justice movement, the anti-Iraq war movement, and the Occupy Wall Street movement (OWS); working on issues of free trade, economic inequality, Latin American solidarity, and anti-sweatshop labor; and acting as an ally for feminist causes, the LGBTQ movement and, most recently, Black Lives Matter (BLM). Given my background, I have spent much time outside of the classroom helping activists and organizers improve their communication and rhetoric. My interests have shifted in recent years after hearing people express confusion about the nature and purpose of social movements—first with OWS, and then

later with BLM. Common refrains would include, “I don’t understand what they are trying to accomplish.” “What’s the point?” “Why are they so angry?” “They’d be more successful if they were less militant.” At first, such comments appeared to be a way to avoid the ideological implications posed by movements—there is no need to thoughtfully listen and respond to, let alone support and participate in, the movements if said movements are deemed chaotic and pointless. But I began to wonder if people were genuinely confused. Haven’t large segments of the population *always* expressed an inability to understand what they are witnessing? And, what if that confusion is not because of any failure on the part of the movements, but rather, because casual observers lack the basic skills needed to understand the goals, tactics, and messages of social movements?

This SML project is part of a larger educational research agenda that I am currently developing. I was on a one-semester sabbatical during the fall, 2016 semester, which allowed me to do research and to teach a SML-specific course for the very first time. The course was offered at Graterford State Prison, which is just outside of Philadelphia. The degree-granting program runs through Villanova University’s Department of Sociology & Criminology, and has been operating since 1972. I was hired as a one-semester adjunct to teach this course.¹

Note about readings and assignments

The specific readings and assignments were chosen based on the assumption that students would have only a cursory understanding of social movements. The chosen materials would be different, for instance, if I knew that students were dedicated activists with years of experience or if they had taken prior social movement classes (history or sociology classes, for example). The materials might also be different if I were teaching the course in a radical bookstore or a progressive community center where I could safely assume that the attendees might have a somewhat more developed knowledge-base about social movements.

As I explain in the syllabus, SML revolves around six core skills/knowledges: how to read the conditions; how to read the communication; how to read the frames; how to read the tactics; switching perspectives; and discussion/debate. Additionally, these skills/knowledges are situated along a continuum of different kinds of learning (theoretical, practical, and communicative). The course materials are intended to develop those skills/knowledges, with different assignments or weekly lesson plans addressing the different kinds of learning. One of the major goals of this particular class is to develop students’ abilities to have informed and intelligent discussions about social movements. This necessitates emphasizing the sixth core skill (discussion/debate) and the third kind of learning (communicative). But again, another class might seek, for instance, to develop students’ abilities to *participate* in social movements. Such a class would then emphasize the fourth core skill (tactics) and the second type of learning (practical). The skills and types of learning that instructors emphasize are relative to the focus of each course.

¹ I should note that I have a forthcoming article in *Pedagogy and Theater of the Oppressed Journal* (summer, 2017) that more fully addresses the parameters of SML.

Concluding remarks

This syllabus is offered in the spirit of interdisciplinary exploration and political solidarity. Each of us comes to the topic of SML from a different position and with different sets of students in mind. Educating students inside traditional classrooms—even from inside a state correctional facility—can be very different from educating students outside of the classroom. The readings, workloads, regularity of meetings, and assignments (if there are any) can be far ranging. The following syllabus is intended to spark readers’ thoughts and ideas of how they might develop and apply SML to their own pedagogical wants and needs.

Syllabus

Course overview

This course improves one’s ability to “read and understand” the nature and function of social movements. From Slavery Abolition and Women’s Suffrage to Black Lives Matter and Occupy Wall Street, social movements are invaluable contributors to our collective lives. But very few people—outside of activists and specialized academics—are properly educated about the histories, conditions, goals, tactics, and influences of social movements. Social Movement Literacy (SML) addresses this deficit by developing core skills and knowledges that enable students to recognize, discuss, perhaps participate in and, if need be, intelligently critique, the ideologies, political motivations, and tactics of social movements. Prior knowledge of social movements is helpful but not necessary. This course acts as an introduction to social movements.

As a beginning point we should realize the significance of social movements: Just about every “right” that we hold dear has come by way of a social movement. The right to vote, a 40-hour work week, labor regulations and worker rights, housing regulations, anti-pollution laws, consumer protections, work place safety, minimum wage, broader and more inclusive college curriculum, anti-discrimination laws, civil rights, free speech, environmental protections, and so on. This does not even touch upon issues of human rights, the ending of wars and genocide, the curbing of nuclear proliferation, and the fight for everyday equality and respect. Make no doubt about it—social movements are thriving contributors to this country and the overall world community.

Learning outcomes

By the end of the semester, students will develop six basic social movement literacy skills/knowledges.

1. **Read the Conditions:** SML involves the ability to recognize and articulate the specific conditions that make possible the emergence of particular social movements.
2. **Read the Communication:** SML involves the ability to recognize, analyze, and understand the verbal, visual, embodied, and mediated communication of social movements.

3. **Read the Frames:** SML involves the ability to recognize how framing (by both insiders, such as activists, and outsiders, like the mass media) can influence perception and understanding of social movement activity.
4. **Read the Tactics:** SML involves the ability to identify and understand social movement tactics (e.g., marches, rallies, sit-ins, strikes, occupations, cultural jamming, etc.).
5. **Switch Perspectives:** SML involves the ability to switch between one's own political worldview and the worldview of various social movements.
6. **Discussion and Debate:** SML involves the ability to discuss and debate the pros and cons of different social movements and the complexities thereof.

These six skills/knowledges are situated along a continuum of different types of learning; these types of learning are not mutually exclusive, but rather, intertwined and recursive.

- The **theoretical/conceptual** teaches people how to cognitively process social movement activity: how to observe, think about, reflect upon, analyze, differentiate, comprehend, and understand the efforts of social movement participants.
- The **practical/performative** teaches people how to enact and participate in social movements: how to organize communities, how to choose the most effective means of activism, how to bring about social change.
- The **communicative/rhetorical** teaches people how to discuss and debate social movement activity: how to describe, analyze, and critique social movements; how to position oneself in relation to, and to articulate one's support and/or critique of, particular social movements.

The Politics of a SML Course²

All education is political, and this class is no exception. As currently conceived, SML involves at least three political implications.

1. SML might **desensitize people** to the perceived "otherness" of social movements. Most people perceive social movements as foreign entities existing outside of their own personal experience. Becoming literate in social movement activity decreases that psychological distance, enabling one to understand why and how others can oppose the taken-for-granted assumptions of, for instance, capitalism, patriotism, patriarchy, White supremacy, American exceptionalism, heteronormativity, speciesism, etc. It also enables one to understand how and why nontraditional political actions (tree-sits, die-ins, general strikes, flash mobs, public occupations, etc.) are necessary for social change and/or liberating for participants.
2. SML might **cultivate empathy** for those who collectively fight for social justice. The working assumption is that desensitization leads to identification and, therefore, empathy. Social movement participants are commonly perceived as alien and/or

² This section was not included in the original syllabus. But after talking with students about these issues on the first day of class, it seems sensible (and perhaps helpful) to include here.

- threatening. But SML might sway people to see social movement participants as heroic, dedicated, and courageous.
3. SML might **create conditions** for the possibility of more social movement activity. Desensitizing students and cultivating an empathic orientation creates the possibility that more people will participate in social movement activity. At the very least, it creates a more supportive environment for those involved with social movements, which makes it more likely that those already predisposed will find it easier to become active. At the very most, those who were previously confused or opposed might actually join social movements.

Note: There is no requirement for students to develop allegiances along any of these political orientations; by no means are these necessary “learning outcomes” for passing the class. However, there is the chance that students may be influenced in these (and other ways). At the very least, one’s political consciousness will be advanced in regards to understanding social movements and the numerous issues addressed (patriarchy, economic inequality, mass incarceration, race relations, etc.). But how students act on that political awareness (if at all) is up to each individual.

Required readings

The required books are listed below. There will be additional readings that will be made available to the class. Unless otherwise noted, weekly readings should be completed before coming to class (see the course calendar).

- Jobin-Leeds, G. & AgitArte. (2016). *When we fight we win! Twenty-first century social movements and the activists that are transforming our world*. New York, NY: The New Press. [This acts as our basic textbook, providing an overview of some major social movements happening today.]
- Boyd, A. & Mitchell, D. O. (2013). *Beautiful trouble: A toolbox for revolution* [Pocket Edition]. New York, NY: OR Books. [This book will be used for understanding the various tactics used by social movements, but it will also provide insight to “framing” issues and help to generate discussion/debate.]
- hooks, b. (2014). *Feminism is for everyone: Passionate politics* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Routledge. [This book addresses a major concern of our time (patriarchy) and its remedy (feminism). In doing so, it helps students develop many if not all of the SML skills/knowledges.]
- Taylor, K-T. (2016). *From #blacklivesmatter to black liberation*. Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books. [This book situates BLM within the historical context of the wider Black freedom movement. Similar to hooks’ book, it helps students develop many if not all of the SML skills/knowledges.]

Course requirements/assignments

(Note: The following descriptions are overviews; students will receive more detailed instructions, including due dates, throughout the semester.)

Short Assignments. There will be various short assignments throughout the semester. These may include quizzes, pop-quizzes, homework, in-class group work, etc. These are short assignments, but realize that they do constitute a significant percentage (1/3) of your grade. The purpose is to approach learning through small, incremental assignments. (100 points, total.)

Position Paper. You are required to write an essay outlining your overall social/political positioning in relationship to the study of social movements. This helps you understand your own worldview, your beginning knowledge of social movements, and what movements you might support or participate in. Please realize that you are in no way graded on your positioning, but rather, on your thoughtful completion of the assignment. (3 pages, 25 points.)

Interview. Each student will be asked to interview a handful of people about their knowledge of social movements. The student will then use the six core skills/knowledges outlined above to assess the interviewees' SML. This is a basic research assignment, with the interview acting as the method of research. Additionally, it allows students to discuss the topic of social movements with people outside of our class. (50 points.)³

Analysis. You are required to analyze a text (speech, essay, manifesto, etc.) using the six core skills/knowledges. We will discuss which text(s) students will analyze later in the semester. (50 points.)

End-of-the-Semester Reflection Paper. You will write a reflection paper that asks you to articulate what you have learned. In brief, you will track your SML development from the position paper to the end of the semester. (50 points.)

Class discussion and Participation. Although I do not officially record "participation points," I do keep a mental note. Class participation can only help you, both for your final grade and your overall educational experience. I expect everyone to regularly or at least semi-regularly participate.

Attendance, Tardiness, and Late Work. There are no excused absences (excluding religious holidays, serious health issues with a doctor's note, etc.). Instead, each student is permitted one free absence to be used at his/her discretion. After that, each additional absence results in a 10-point deduction from your attendance grade. Right now you have 25 points for attendance. You can miss 1 class without penalty. But missing a second class gives you a 15, and a third gives you a 05. Also, with three or more absences, I reserve the right to lower your final grade by one full letter grade (e.g., from a B+ to a C+). And, with 4 or more absences, I reserve the right to issue a failing grade for the semester.

Excessive tardiness will also be penalized. Everyone is late once in a while. That is fine and understandable. If tardiness becomes a problem, then I begin to count every three lates as one absence. Additionally, if you are late by fifteen or more minutes, you receive only half-credit for the class period.

³ Due to a special status assigned to my particular students protecting usage of their speech, I had to replace this assignment with a more traditional essay.

My general rule on late work: Late assignments can be handed in *one class period* after the original due date. That late assignment will receive a 5-point deduction. Assignments will *not* be accepted after that one-week grace period.

<u>Grading</u>	
Smaller Assignments	100
1 Position Paper	25
1 Interview	50
1 Analysis	50
1 Reflection Paper	50
<u>1 Attendance Grade</u>	<u>25</u>
Total Points	300

To compute your final grade, divide your earned points by the possible points to get your percentage.

Final Grade Percentages

A	100 - 93
A-	92.99 - 90
B+	89.99 - 87
B	86.99 - 83
B-	82.99 - 80
C+	79.99 - 77
C	76.99 - 73
C-	72.99 - 70
D+	69.99 - 67
D	66.99 - 63
D-	62.99 - 60
F	59.99 - 00

Course policies

Mutual Respect. All members of the class, including me, will always treat each other with dignity and respect: e.g., no racial, gender, sexist, homophobic slurs, no talking over one another, no aggressive behavior, etc.

Attentiveness. No sleeping in class. I ask that we all be engaged and attentive to both the professor and other students.

Academic Integrity. Plagiarism—or any other form of cheating—is not tolerated. Plagiarism receives an automatic “F” on the assignment and, depending upon the nature of the offense, possibly an “F” for the course. Please be smart about this; it simply isn’t worth it.

Learning Needs. Students with unique learning needs should speak with me at the start of the semester so I can establish the best possible accommodations. I have worked with all kinds of students with all kinds of learning styles. I will do my best to be helpful.

Sincerity and Honesty. I always try to be honest and fair with my students, and I appreciate the same courtesy. Thus, if you forget to do an assignment, just say so. You may not get the points, but you'll earn my respect. This can be more helpful than you think in the long run.

Critical Thinking and Constructive Criticism. I encourage critical thinking and constructive criticism during class discussions. I ask that we all engage in scholarly discussion about course concepts, theories, and procedures. I will try to provide us with the opportunity to voice our opinions throughout the semester. Hopefully we can cultivate an educational atmosphere where we can gain a deeper understanding of ourselves, each other, and our surrounding world.

Effort and Engagement. Please realize that your presence in class and basic completion of assignments do not equal a good grade. You need to be mentally (not just physically) present and you need to complete assignments with thought and effort. Basically, you need to earn your grade. That takes personal effort.

Enjoyment. Last, try to have some fun. We'll be together for four months, so we might as well enjoy the experience! ☺

Course Calendar (Once-per-Week Class)

*The following schedule is tentative. I guarantee that it will change as the semester unfolds, especially after the first few weeks.

**The first reading of each week is the most important. If during a particular week you cannot do all the readings, then be sure to at least do the first listed reading.

DATE	TOPICS/READINGS/ASSIGNMENTS
Week 1:	<p>Introductions. Syllabus. Get to know each other. Basic definitions and a brief overview of some major social movements. Breaking down SML. <i>Assign Position Paper.</i></p>
Week 2:	<p><i>When We Fight (WWF):</i> Read Forward and Introduction. WWF: Read Chapter 5, Economic Power. Complete homework for Ch. 5. Position Paper is Due.</p>
Week 3:	<p>WWF: Read Chapter 2, Public Education. Complete HW for Ch. 2. Additional Reading: <i>The Courage to Teach Critically</i>, by Verma, pages 185-199. Get your position papers back.</p>
Week 4:	<p>WWF: Read Chapter 3, Mass Incarceration. Complete HW for Ch. 3. Additional Reading: "Transformative Justice," by Nocella et al, pages 83-98.</p>

Assign Interview Assignment.

- Week 5: WWF: Read Chapter 1, the LGBTQ Movement. Complete HW for Ch. 1.
Additional Reading: “Intersectionality,” by Williams, pages 1-3.
- Week 6: WWF: Read Chapter 4, Immigrant Rights. Complete HW for Ch. 4.
Additional Reading: “Why Stories Matter,” by Ganz, pages 1-3.
Interview Assignment Due.
- Week 7: WWF: Read Chapter 6, Environmental Justice. Complete HW for Ch. 6.
Additional Reading: “A Movement for a New Planet,” McKibben, pages 1-12.
Get interview assignment back.
Assign Analysis Assignment.
- Week 8: WWF: Read Epilogue and Afterword. No HW.
Lecture on “Creative Activism” (which prepares you for next week’s reading).
Discuss/debrief first half of the semester.
- Week 9: *Beautiful Trouble*: Read the whole book (it’s a quick read). Complete HW.
- Week 10: *Feminism is for Everybody*: Read pages 1-60.
Analysis is Due.
- Week 11: *Feminism is for Everybody*: Read pages 61-118. Complete HW.
Get your analysis back.
Assign final paper.
- Week 12: *From #Blacklivesmatter*: Read pages 1-50. Complete HW.
Get analysis back.
- Week 13: *From #Blacklivesmatter*: Read pages 51-106.
- Week 14: *From #Blacklivesmatter*: Read pages 107-152.
Final Paper is Due.
- Week 15: Final Meeting.
From #Blacklivesmatter: Read pages 153-219.
Get final papers back.
Wrap up, discuss, close out.

Full Citation Material for “Additional Readings” (Listed Alphabetically)

- Ganz, M. (2009, March). Why stories matter: The art and craft of social change. *Sojourners*. Retrieved from <https://sojo.net/magazine/march-2009/why-stories-matter>

- McKibben, B. (2013, August 18). A movement for a new planet. *Tomdispatch*. Retrieved from <http://www.tomdispatch.com/blog/175737/>
- Nocella, A. J. II, Chirpin, M., Antar, A., & Page, A. (2014). Transformative justice and conflict transformation. In J. Del Gandio & A. J. Nocella II (Eds.), *Educating for action: Strategies to ignite social justice* (pp. 83-98). Gabriola Island, BC: New Society Publishers.
- Williams, S. (2014, August 21). What is intersectionality and why is it important? *Care2*. Retrieved from <http://www.care2.com/causes/what-is-intersectionality-and-why-is-it-important.html>
- Verma, R. (2014). The courage to teach critically: Anti-oppression and pro-justice dialogues in the classroom. In J. Del Gandio & A. J. Nocella II (Eds.), *Educating for action: Strategies to ignite social justice* (pp. 185-199). Gabriola Island, BC: New Society Publishers.



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