



PROJECT MUSE®

Teaching (is not) Activism

Nicholas Hengen Fox

Radical Teacher, Number 94, Fall 2012, pp. 14-23 (Article)

Published by University of Illinois Press



➔ For additional information about this article

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/rdt/summary/v094/94.fox.html>

Teaching (is not) Activism

By Nicholas Hengen Fox



As much as we talk politics with our students, read political novels, and highlight the activism of the past, the walls of the classroom present a problem for radical teachers. Our meetings host passionate discussions where students begin to tackle assumptions, dismantle ideas of privilege, even critique capitalism. But when class ends, what happens to the political fervor? Where does that revolutionary spark go? Does it spread out into the streets? Or does it end up at the bottom of backpacks, forgotten like last week's homework?

Increasingly, I have begun to believe it is the latter; and I have been frustrated by the lack of connection between the political sentiments generated by classroom discussion and political action. While it is easy to feel that teaching is a kind of activism, I have become increasingly convinced that thinking of it in those terms only aides the disconnect between the classroom and the streets. Wearing the cap of teacher-activist makes us feel good at the end of the day—and that is important—but what is politics without action? What good is interpreting the world if we are not changing it in material ways?

I am inclined to say, then, that teaching is not activism. But, like my title, I want to equivocate. In what follows I sketch out my own attempts to more clearly align what happens in the classroom to the activism—“a vigorous and even aggressive action in pursuit of political or social change,” as Linda Dittmar and Joseph Entin define it in a recent issue of *Radical Teacher*—that happens beyond it (6).¹ Such a connection, I believe, will make good on the political hope that many of us feel during classroom discussions by linking it with more immediate action.

In this ambition I am hardly alone.

Increasingly popular “service learning” courses, for instance, attempt to engage students in their communities—though sometimes with mixed results. And other, more radical incarnations of such classes exist, like Kathryn Miles’s *Literature of Social Protest and Civil Disobedience*, in which her Unity College students’ final project was an act of civil disobedience (Miles 865).

Yet not all courses can be service learning (and not all service learning courses are politically active). Nor can all courses be as radical as Miles’s. After all, the majority of instructors now teach without tenure, often in courses with pre-set curricula, both of which leave little leeway for radically inventive course design. That is why I have chosen the two examples I discuss here from an American Literature survey course—the kind of traditional, canonically-focused course taught across the academic spectrum: in high schools, community colleges, and elite universities. So while the classrooms I am describing are those of an urban public research university in the early 21st century—with all the attendant exclusions such institutions imply—I chose these activities with their broad usefulness in mind. Indeed, that such practices can reach out to a broad array of students—not just those who are predisposed to be “radical” or even “political”; not just those with the time for service learning—is perhaps their greatest strength.

What I propose then are some ways of shaping assignments so that rather than focusing on what a text says, students focus on how it has been—and could be—used in the world beyond the classroom. I call this pedagogical method teaching “texts as tactics.” Thinking about texts as tactics serves to constantly recall

THE TWO CLASSROOM EXAMPLES I DESCRIBE AT LENGTH BELOW SHOW MY ATTEMPTS TO MOVE FROM TEACHING “ABOUT” ACTIVISM TO ENCOURAGING STUDENTS TO DEPLOY TEXTS AS TACTICS BEYOND THE CLASSROOM.

literature as a means for particular and local—as opposed to global or ideological—intervention.² What is important, when we are looking at texts as tactics, is not just that a poem or novel represents politics, but that the text is placed in a non-literary context and made to “do something” for someone. Thus, I try to teach my students about instances when texts have been deployed in unexpected ways and with meaningful results; then I try to help them think about how they can engage in similar practices.

The two classroom examples I describe at length below show my attempts to move from teaching “about” activism to encouraging students to deploy texts as tactics beyond the classroom. Sadly, these two examples have not yet galvanized any great social movements. But they do describe the growth of a pedagogy that not only helps students see the distinction between interpreting and changing the world, but one that also encourages students to participate in that change. Thus, rather than seeing my teaching, in itself, as activism, I am hopeful because, in teaching texts as tactics, I can see myself shaping and enabling myriad self-directed activists. Such a pedagogical practice, I believe, does more to make good on the struggles of the past than does teaching about activism. Rather than polishing histories of struggle or massaging ideologies, teaching texts as tactics aims to pursue political and social change in the present.

Activity One: Tactical Rewriting

Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle* (1906) is a particularly rich text for teaching students about activism—not only for its searing reportage and its rich description of turn of the century immigration, but for its

dramatization of the perils of audience. And Sinclair’s book famously changed the world, if not in the way he intended. It served as a catalyst for the Pure Food and Drugs Act—passed just five months after the book was published, read, and discussed by President Roosevelt and other Washington power-players. But as Sinclair famously lamented: “I aimed for the public’s heart, and by accident hit it in the stomach” (*Jungle* xi). While the book was supposed to lead to a socialist revolution, it instead helped pass a law about food safety. Inevitably Sinclair offends a significant portion of my classes with his browbeating on both the topic of meat and of socialism. By the novel’s end, the class is usually divided between loving and hating Sinclair. There is, it seems, no middle ground.

I start almost immediately by problematizing the text. Is it literature? Is it journalism? A political treatise? Certainly one could make arguments for each. The nuanced and complex descriptions of its early pages and Sinclair’s temporal shifting in the first eight chapters suggest it has many of the crafted qualities we often associate with literature. But, on the other hand, there are elements of fairly remarkable implausibility. Was it really common for immigrants living in poverty to, upon arriving in Packingtown, take daylong tours of the packing plants? As the text

goes on—and it does go on and on and on—students tend to see more evidence of its propagandistic tendencies, less of its literary bent. In my classes, we have studied the way Sinclair's writing often veers from its more standard melodramatic tone and leaps up on the soapbox—and this before the novel's final chapters with their literal soapboxes.

My classes are polarized, then, between those who value Sinclair's depictions of turn-of-the-century immigrant life, the book's ability to keep their attention for such a long span, even its plot, and those who focus on the novel's excesses—its repetition of plot points like the deaths of children and Jurgis's departure and return motif—and its lacks—particularly with respect to the ending, which many see as unfulfilling, unbelievable, or both. Among the former usually are the students who identify as progressive or leftist—and the vegetarians in the class. Detractors tend to be more politically conservative or aesthetically elitist.

My first attempt to deploy the text as a tactic—that is, to move the students beyond critique and toward action—was fairly simple. Our midterm exam³ directly followed our reading of *The Jungle*. Students were warned that they would write an essay about the novel and, as extra credit on the exam, I gave them a space to answer a simple question:

If you were writing a political novel today, in the fashion of Sinclair, what would you focus on?

The question is, in the term recently popularized by Cass Sunstein, a “nudge”—it asks students to see themselves, like Sinclair, as people with political commitments and, even more, as people who might turn those commitments to a kind

of literary activism.⁴ It encourages them, too, to think of literature as part of a tactical approach to activism.

The answers were illuminating. Some of them corroborated how successfully Sinclair's novel had touched certain nerves: at least two of the sixteen students in my summer session course wanted to “update” Sinclair's food politics, focusing more explicitly on vegetarianism. The answer of one student (a non-traditional enrollee who worked full-time in food service) implied that she had already thought about such a project at some length; she offered a brief narrative about a war between bikes and cars. The rest touched on familiar complaints of the contemporary era: polarized mass media, religious fundamentalism. None failed to jot down at least a suggestion for possible further writing. And this total participation (however goaded by extra credit) is important. Whenever I teach Sinclair, I have students who resist his socialism. Yet, pulled out of an explicitly socialist context, my students do not resist the idea of the political work of literature. That students are even willing to think politics is at least a small victory.⁵

But—and the foreclosing nature of testing is surely to blame here—there was not much more to say. When we met again, I encouraged the students to get to work on their novels. They smiled ruefully—like they, with school and work and their lives, had time. After all, they had just witnessed the debatable success of a text like Sinclair's—it did not lead to a socialist revolution in the early twentieth century; it had not convinced them to become socialists. Not exactly a peptalk for the potential of the novel as an effective mode of activism.

But how would one turn this speculative

question into something more material? I can suggest two possibilities. Grounded in a discussion of Sinclair's novel as political, we might assign a brief essay something along these lines:

When an editor works with a manuscript, she suggests changes. Pretend that what we read was the manuscript of *The Jungle* and you are the editor. You acknowledge, as we have in class, that Sinclair's novel is explicitly political. Write him a one-to-two page letter in which you make specific suggestions about how to make it a "better" political novel. Suggest specific changes, cuts, or additions.

Such an assignment not only carries obvious traditional learning outcomes but does so while empowering students vis-à-vis "literature." Most centrally, though, it encourages students to refine their ideas about how to speak politically. When I used this not as a writing assignment but as a discussion piece, students already had ideas, pushing for a subtler hand or richer portraits of its characters, which might, they said, lead to greater empathy. Some thought it should be shorter in general—how many working people today find time to read a four-hundred page novel?—but some made a clear point by specifically slicing off the final chapters, the most obviously socialist writing in the book, thus refocusing the novel on food politics.

Spending even more time, could we assign students to write—or at least outline—their own political novels? Or, perhaps more reasonably, a short story based on a reading of *The Jungle* or a counter-narrative to a less obviously progressive text like *The Great Gatsby* (1925)? Such assignments, of course, do much to encourage greater textual attention

among students and can, I think, easily be justified in the context of a literature course.⁶

From the extra credit question to the assignment that students write their own political fictions, these approaches focus students on not just the idea of literature as political, but of literature as a political tool that they can deploy to an audience beyond the classroom. This was my first step towards thinking of how I might shape students' tactical use of literature. But it came up short. The students did not produce much of anything, by way of writing or by way of political transformations. Our conversations about the world beyond the classroom were brief and speculative. Could I be more successful, I wondered, if I encouraged students to use already established literature tactically?

Activity Two: Tactical Reading

In my American Literature survey courses, I use Langston Hughes as a lodestone and guidestar for the twentieth century. We read his work from the teens through the 1940s. I like students to trace the growth of one author in a course dedicated to coverage and students (though they are often miffed at having to buy the expensive *Collected Poems*—the only text costing more than a few dollars I ask them to buy) find tracing Hughes's developments rewarding.

Teaching Hughes's 1930s work is a treat. Students who know a little of Hughes "the blues poet" are often shocked by both the formal and political changes in his radical decade. From "Merry Christmas" (1929) to "Advertisement for the Waldorf-Astoria" (1931), Hughes attacks capitalism, classism, sexism, nationalism, and racism while displaying remarkable formal innovation.

Of Hughes's 1930s work, I focus on the tactical use of one poem: "Let America Be America Again" (1938). I begin the session by guiding students through a number of poems, from the formally radical like "Wait" (1933) to the more traditional "One more 'S' in the U.S.A." (1934). We discuss these poems while I offer bibliographic and historical context (where the poems were first published; where Hughes wrote them; formal alterations for inclusion in the *Collected*). Taking time on these texts not only provides coverage, but allows us to contextualize the particularity of "Let America Be America Again."

First we discuss "Let America" like the other poems. Then I note that while most of the poems from the 1930s appeared once in Hughes's life (usually in a leftist newspaper or magazine), "Let America" had a remarkable career. I ask students—still working in the abstract—why that might be the case: Its varied conversations with the American cultural tradition from "America the Beautiful" (1895) to "This Land is Your Land" (1940)? Its formal accessibility? Its not-explicitly-African American voice—indeed, its evocation of a multiplicity of voices and races?

These questions prime students to think of the poem as a particular social and rhetorical formation, but also to see it in the broader sweep of American poetry. Yet students' responses maintain—true to their literary training—the poem as a poem or, at most, a document of the 1930s. They evoke the depression and Jim Crow laws, as well as the inherent conflicts with

the internationalism voiced in the other poems.

I encourage them to keep these thoughts in mind as I break them into groups, each of which receives a copy of one of the different iterations of Hughes's poem. These are the versions I use:

- * The poem's original publication (only the first 50 lines) in *Esquire* (1936)
- * Its appearance in the International Workers Order (IWO) pamphlet *A New Song* (1938) at full length
- * Its absence from *Selected Poems* (1956)
- * The small *Let America Be America Again* (2004) "chapbook" version published by John Kerry's presidential campaign with an introduction by the candidate
- * A post from the AFL-CIO blog from February 2008, linking the poem to



Black History Month and—of course—the democratic primary battle between Hillary Rodham Clinton and Barack Obama

I ask the groups to read their version of the poem and prepare to tell us about its difference from the source text in our book—with emphasis (since the variations are minor, except in the case of *Esquire*) on its material and historical contexts.

Walking around as the groups pick apart their texts, I see how intrigued they are. They enjoy, among other things, the historical mystery of how this poem from the 1930s has maintained relevance. Sometimes the *Selected Poems* group will be flummoxed—I remember one woman calling me over to her group and angrily pointing out that the poem was not even in the book! But with a little prodding and the suggestion her group came to see what other 1930s poems Hughes included in that collection, they quickly begin to connect the suppression of the radical 1930s Hughes with the cultural moment of the book's publication.

After fifteen minutes, students are ready to share. Readers from the 1930s note the nature of the publication—union pamphlet versus national magazine; shorter versus longer versions. The 1950s readers showcase their acumen in discussing a publication that is not a publication at all. The richest responses seem to come from the groups discussing the contemporary uses. Both times I have done this activity, the whole classroom has become involved in a discussion of the identity politics of a white politician evoking a black poet.⁷ The contemporary context—one that was at least somewhat familiar to them—seemed to embolden the students. They are, naturally, more familiar with the

cultural situation of the 2000s, than the 1930s or 1950s. And, while some know (and most can intuit) some of the historical context of the other examples, the emphatic response to the contemporary republications suggests one of the risks involved in teaching older texts. While we can encourage dialectical thinking, such thought often requires a depth of knowledge to be fully productive.

During these discussions, I create a timeline on the board. And, once we hear from each group, I turn the class back to their initial reflections on the poem as a “1930s poem.” Many realize, powerfully, that the poem belongs as much to today as to the 1930s—indeed, it seems quite possible that more people have encountered it in the 2000s than did in the 1930s, when, despite the cultural prominence of the American Left, the sentiments the poem expresses were highly contested and often suppressed.

As the class wraps up, I explain that we have just examined the “tactical” uses of Hughes's poems—from the 1930s to the contemporary era. Such an examination of the tactical uses of texts by Hughes or others might well prove fruitful in final papers or elsewhere. I leave them with the question of how they might use Hughes's poems in their lives: to help friends see race in new ways, as fodder for campus newspapers, websites, blogs, or social networking sites. One might also shape further discussion by putting this question directly to students. Such speculation could be easily materialized in, say, a final project that encourages students to either enact or design a program for tactical reading with one of the authors or texts the class had read.⁸

The potential of these Hughes-centered activities are, I think, greater than those

I devised for *The Jungle* for two reasons. First, because they use ready-made materials and second because they elaborate a number of ways in which such materials might be deployed.

Most obviously, poems already exist. And our students—if they have done their reading for class—are familiar with lots of them. They have a storehouse of readily available texts for tactical action. The bar to entry for activism in this approach is not terribly high. This is a good thing if we want to encourage whatever activism we can.

And the Hughes activity does more than simply suggest that poems might be used in activism. The uses of “Let America Be America” effectively disconnect the author from the poem and disconnect the poem from its moment of original publication. They encourage students not just to delve into what an author was thinking or how a text relates to a historical moment, but to really examine how texts can be used as a part of activist politics across time and space. Teaching the text as a tactic shows them how people have thought to re-publish the poem in different contexts. This activates students by demonstrating how the act of interpretation can be joined with material action. They are not just reading the politics but thinking about how the text’s politics might speak to current audiences, encouraging them—to take the example of the AFL-CIO blog post—to organize with a union in support of shared political objectives. In short, if we want students to “be political,” we need to draw a clear equation between political being and political action. Studying such actions is a first step, as it both implicitly and explicitly helps them think about how they might set about re-publishing a poem, whether

by Hughes or Plath or Joe Hill, for their own political reasons.

Thus, we might ask students to choose among the tactical uses and describe which succeeds and why. Or they could be asked to pick another text and suggest who might use it today and how. Or, perhaps as an extra credit assignment—or final project component—students could be asked to “publish” a poem of their choice somewhere, whether by making copies to post around campus (or, better, around town), on a Facebook group, or anywhere else they can imagine. This seems like a small gesture, but it is, again, one with remarkable potential. Not only is the emancipatory potential of the act significant in itself, but it encourages students to think of all of their coursework as potentially political while encouraging them to build patterns of activism.

Teaching Tactics

Both of the activities I have described helped my students examine how texts had been used as tactics by authors and activists in the past. But more importantly, the activities helped them conceive of how they might participate in such practices in the present outside of the classroom. Yet, as I have noted throughout, neither of these activities fully breaks through the walls of the classroom. A pedagogy that truly teaches texts as tactics will produce real—not speculative—activism.

Still, the steps toward speculative activism I have described here are meaningful. Simply speculating in these terms helps students see themselves not as passive learners about great political works of the past, but as (potential) actors in the political struggles of the present. This is both a pedagogical point and a larger philosophical one. Pedagogically, these prac-

tices argue for a particular relationship between teaching and politics: namely, that the distinction between teaching *about* activism and teaching students *to act* is one that radical teachers should always keep in mind, in part because teaching “about” politics can run up against the walls of the classroom, and in part because of its problematic philosophical underpinnings.

If we are historical materialists, our ambition is not to indoctrinate students but to show them just how powerfully effective the fundamentals of this practice can be. As Lukács argues in “What is Orthodox Marxism?” (1919), Marxism refers not to a set of established ideas, but “exclusively to *method*”; since “all social phenomena change constantly in the course of their ceaseless dialectical interactions with each other” we must understand any approach to reality “*as a social process*” (1, 13). Replace “method” with “pedagogy” and it seems Lukács has prefigured my point here by nearly a century. To intervene politically we must define a pedagogy—not a presumptive outcome. The aim of teaching texts as tactics is not to produce a stable sense of what politics is, a political consciousness, or even (in Jameson’s famous phrase) a political unconscious, but a notion of how to put political ideas into practice with literature. If we do not teach students how to move from interpreting the world to changing it, our practice of politics is hardly a practice at all.

Thus whatever my own (all too obvious) political allegiances, I would like to suggest that one could just as easily draw on a “tactical” approach in a course that read texts much less leftist. The activities I describe above might apply just as effectively to Sui Sin Far, Herman Melville, or,

IF WE DO NOT TEACH STUDENTS HOW TO MOVE FROM INTERPRETING THE WORLD TO CHANGING IT, OUR PRACTICE OF POLITICS IS HARDLY A PRACTICE AT ALL.

as I note above, Fitzgerald, to say nothing of Ayn Rand.⁹

While *what* we teach in literature courses is important—and we should continue to draw from the repressed-and-recovered leftists texts to construct our canons—I hope to have suggested here that *how* we teach texts may matter more. It is easy enough for students to develop the skills to produce political interpretations. But interpretation, particularly at the level of classroom discussion, requires little commitment. And while, as I acknowledged above, my teaching of texts as tactics has yet to foment any revolution, I believe that by using the classroom to plant the seeds of political action in the wider world, I will have not just taught students about politics, but empowered them in the practice of politics.

Works Cited

“About.” *IvanhoeGame.org*. n.d. Web. 16 January 2009.

de Certeau, Michel. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Trans. Steven Randall. Berkeley, Cal.: University of California Press, 1984. Print.

Dittmar, Linda and Joseph Entin. “Introduction: Jamming the Works: Art, Politics, and Activism.” *Radical Teacher*. 89 (Winter 2010). 3-9. Print.

Lukács, Georg. *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*. Trans. Rodney Livingstone. Cambridge,

Mass.: MIT Press, 1971. Print.

Miles, Kathryn. "Get Up, Stand Up: Teaching Civil Disobedience in the Literature Classroom" *PMLA*. 124.3 (2009). 864-869. Print.

Sinclair, Upton. *The Jungle*. Intro. Eric Schlosser. Penguin: New York, 2006. Print.

Notes

1 In drawing this distinction, I follow John Conley, whose recent essay "Against Heroism" offers a strong challenge to the idea that the classroom is a space for political action at all. See, Conley, John. "Against Heroism: On Politically-Committed Academic Labor" in the *Minnesota Review* (Winter/Spring 2009).

2 In choosing "tactics" as a keyword, I am especially influenced by Michel de Certeau. For him a tactic is a means of resistance in a highly stratified power structure, a "use" that runs contrary to presumptive—or programmatic—uses (30). Thus the use of literature (often assumed in our culture to be powerless, elite, removed) to practice politics serves as a kind of tactical practice.

3 Early in my teaching career, I was made to believe testing was essential to keeping students reading. I have come to see that it is not. The question on my midterm, then, could be used in other far less stratified assignments: a low-stakes in-class writing or a journal response, for instance.

4 See Sunstein's book, written with Richard Thaler: *Nudge: Improving Decisions About Health, Wealth, and Happiness* (2008).

5 Particularly in the era of conservative activist David Horowitz's notion that the classroom must be a neutral space, with a range of different ideas receiving equal attention.

6 Jerome McGann and Johanna Drucker's "Ivanhoe Game"—in which ludic approaches such as re-writing texts from within are used to help expose textual rules or norms—have strongly influenced my ideas here (About). Though McGann often describes the game as a "critical" endeavor, one could certainly argue that it moves its players beyond a purely "critical" position.

7 Students also have noted the contrast between Hughes's rhetorical force and Kerry's speeches. I do not mean to say the class consensed that Kerry's use of the text was opportunistic or in bad faith; rather, the students found it easy to see why Kerry would adopt the poem—and why quotations from it in his speeches were often selective, stripping the poem of its more radical phrases.

8 Such an assignment would, I think, cross the line for most literature class final projects. The problem is not, to me, the ethical one Miles discusses—of poorly discharging "our responsibilities to our disciplines, our students, our institutions"—but the practical one of assigning such a practice without getting fired because of others' short-sighted definitions of those responsibilities (868). We could surely, for instance, assign a tactical practice combined with a more traditional display of academic skills (writing, analysis, and the like) that explained the practice's relation to more literary aspects—as Miles does.

9 Such uses would at some level necessitate the development of an alternative philosophical grounding; I am not sure you can cite Lukács in support of Rand's rabid individualism. But the activities themselves could generate similar and important conversations and actions.