

# Writing and Social Justice: Student-Centered Social Pedagogy

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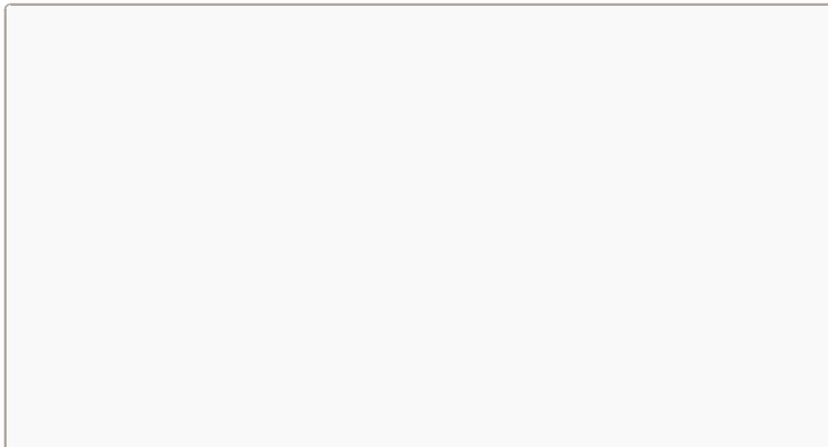
SLCC students, together with faculty and staff, to host a student-centered conference on Writing and Social Justice (WSJ).

Authors: Kati Lewis and Charlotte Howe

## ***If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.***

That's an African proverb, and it gets at what we're exploring with this social pedagogy and ePortfolios at SLCC. Could acts of public creativity and participation in a digital age be a means of social change? We can extend the reach and perhaps strengthen the impact of public creativity and participation with the tools of the digital age. According to Clay Shirky in *Cognitive Surplus*, "Change in the direction of more participation has already happened... what we do with it will be determined largely by how well we are able to imagine and reward public creativity, participation, and sharing."

Every spring the English department funds the Student Conference on Writing and Social Justice (WSJ). The conference committee is largely made up of English faculty with some staff and faculty from other areas (the [Thayne Center](#), ePortfolio, ACE Speaker's Bureau, etc.). The chair of the committee is always from the English department. The actual conference is for students to present their ideas on social justice issues.



Each year the conference is centered on a social justice theme (e.g. Disabilities, Civil Discourse, Gender Inequality, etc.) and a keynote speaker, who works on issues related to the theme, is invited to share their experiences with our community. Nicholas Kristoff, Eliza Griswold, and others have offered powerful keynote

addresses during previous WSJ conferences. Students from across disciplines were invited to participate in this annual conference; however, student involvement typically came from English majors or students taking English department offerings. Last year, Brittany Stephenson (English faculty and last year's WSJ co-chair) developed a special topics class, Writing and Social Justice (ENGL 1900—the number will change), for students who wanted to get involved in organizing the conference. The development of this class allowed for students to become more deeply involved in the conference.

For the 2013 conference, Charlotte Howe changed things up by inviting me ([Kati Lewis](#)) to be her committee co-chair. We also changed the tone of the conference by focusing less on problems surrounding social justice issues. Instead, we focused on how people were driving change with their creativity. Our theme for 2013 was **Acts of Public Creativity and Participation**. We asked students to consider the following questions as they prepared proposals for their conference presentations:

- What role does public creativity and participation play in bringing people together and creating social justice? What is the power of writing, singing, dancing, feasting, painting, sculpting, etc. to create social justice in the world?
- And how does the reach of the internet affect public creativity and participation and its ability to create social justice?

Additionally, we involved people from all over the college to be a part of WSJ: staff from the film/communication department; faculty from Physical Sciences, Fashion and Design, Dance, Humanities; Student Life and Leadership; staff from the THAYNE Center—Service Learning department. Once her ENGL 1900 class began, the committee became facilitators of the conference as opposed to the primary organizers—students took true ownership of the Student Conference on Writing and Social Justice.

Another change to the conference was that instead of seeking primarily journalists for the keynote address, we sought artists from local and international communities who were willing to share their artistic and creative activism with us. Our WSJ “cohorts” brought together diverse members of global and local communities to show how art can be used to drive social change. For a day in March and two days in April, SLCC became a central point for art and peace.

[Ronny Edry](#) and Sany Arazi, Israeli graphic designers and [PeaceFactory](#) members, spoke to hundreds of faculty, staff, and students about the political and cultural climate in Israel in March 2013. After their presentations, they helped SLCC students create their own peace posters. Edry gave part of the 2013 WSJ keynote address from Tel Aviv via Skype.

[Ashley Anderson](#), Salt Lake City dancer, teacher, activist, and organizer worked with Howe's ENGL 1900 students on crafting a dance for the flash mob that they performed in April as a way to kick off the event and to get the community dancing. She also offered and performed part of the keynote address.

Jesses Parent, award-winning performance poet from Salt Lake City, helped kick off flash mob and the conference with his performance poetry. Parent began his performance with “[Hooked Cross](#).” Anderson danced to his poetry—two art forms connected by language, space, and community.



The changes to the conference created community, a real sense of responsibility to our communities, and empowerment for all of those involved. In fact, our students have established lasting relationships with the keynote performers and so many others involved in this year's WSJ conference. Their experiences, performances, reflections, and other WSJ work is documented in their SLCC Gen Ed ePortfolios.

...And we created a community graffiti wall...



Parent and Anderson performing



## Findings

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