



“No Justice, No Peace”: Yard Signs as Public Pedagogy and Community Engagement at the Intersection of Public Health Crises

Brigitte Mussack 

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Abstract: This paper examines yard signs as a site for public pedagogy that engages two concurrent, and comorbid, public health crises: the COVID-19 pandemic and racism. Specifically, I reflect on how yard signs responding to the George Floyd murder in my own Minneapolis neighborhood exist during a kairotic moment; as myself and my students are increasingly confined to our own homes, and as the boundaries between school and home are blurred, the public health crisis of racism and the specific community response of yard signs present opportunities for examining how these signs can act as entry points into difficult conversations among neighbors, classmates, and colleagues. While such signs are certainly examples of epideictic rhetoric, participating in either “praise or blame,” I suggest that communication teachers can frame them as public pedagogy that “strikes a harmony between learning through public engagement and understanding these public encounters in the space of the classroom” (Holmes, 2016). As such, they can act not only as artifacts of community belonging, but as artifacts to promote reflection, conversation, and inquiry.

We are currently living and working through dual public health crises: the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, which has changed and continues to change our relationship with public spaces and with others, and a breaking point of police violence and institutional racism, which has plagued BIPOC communities for centuries. Over the past year, university faculty have had to reimagine their classes in virtual or online spaces while working from their homes. Likewise, our students must create learning environments

Brigitte Mussack, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN

CONTACT: muss0039@umn.edu

without the common spaces at the university to facilitate community engagement. In my own home city of Minneapolis, several months into adjusting to working and learning in confined environments, those environments turned increasingly hostile as the city erupted in protests and as the lack of safe space for students and teachers of color was once again made painfully, urgently present after the murder of George Floyd.

During stay-at-home orders, as our homes are often not “safe spaces” and as we are physically isolated from our university communities, how can we foster environments where we explore difficult conversations with students while maintaining respectful boundaries between home and school? How are communities engaging and supporting one another in isolation? In this paper, I reflect on neighborhood yard signs as timely, meaningful artifacts that teachers might use as entryways into such conversations. Further, I reflect on how such artifacts might help us imagine and engage community dialogue during this kairotic intersection of public health crises.

A Kairotic Moment for Learning and Reflection

As communication instructors, we seek to create community and engage our students as members. In Peter Elbow’s (1973) iconic text *Writing Without Teachers*, he positions having a community of writers and readers as the most important way for individuals to develop their voice and, by extension, to participate fully in the public sphere. Elbow emphasizes writing as “a transaction with yourself and with other people” and builds his pedagogy on that concept of writing as community (p. 76). Scholars of online pedagogy have long written about the unique affordances and challenges of developing community in online classroom environments; now, as we are increasingly relegated to our homes and immediate community spaces, and as we are limited in face-to-face contact, the importance of virtual and online communities is immediately present.

While working from home has made me feel, at times, more isolated from my university community, it also presents an opportunity for deeper connection with my neighborhood community. Like so many around the world, I have spent the last year at home with my family, intimately glimpsing how my partner and children and neighbors conduct themselves in their professional spaces. During the early weeks of the COVID-19 pandemic stay-at-home orders, my 6-year-old learned to read. His mastery of this new skill coincided with intense changes to our lives and habits; our daily routine no longer involved commutes into downtown, or bus rides to school or the university campus. With limited places to safely go outside our own home, and under CDC recommendations regarding low-risk activities, my children and I increased our neighborhood walks.

Accustomed to yard signs that range from political to supporting local businesses and schools, I may not have interacted with the onslaught of signs surrounding my home. However, through neighborhood walks with my children during a time of restricted outings, my son was excited to engage his world through text. He read each sign, out loud, as we passed by on our walks. After reading, he would ask question after question, trying to understand the meaning and context. I would answer, as best I could, in a way appropriate for a young child becoming a more active member of his community.

After the murder of George Floyd, my community focused more acutely and urgently on another, equally dangerous, public health crisis: structural racism and the murder of Black people at the hands of the Minneapolis police department. Racism and racial disparities have been part of my community, but as a White woman living in a comfortable neighborhood in south Minneapolis, it is easy for me to ignore the

urgency of that crisis. However, the protests following George Floyd's murder and the targeted violence and riots in my neighborhood made that crisis more apparent. Already stuck in my immediate physical community, another kairotic moment emerged: it is increasingly difficult to escape or ignore what is, and has been, happening within the boundaries of my immediate neighborhood—the 6-block radius surrounding my home—and throughout my broader community.

We had already had discussions about what happened when police officers killed George Floyd; he had seen Black Lives Matter signs since infancy. But being able to actually read these signs on his own led to a different type of engagement with what has been happening in his neighborhood. He asked me to explain Black Lives Matter again, and what "No Justice, No Peace" meant. As I explained signs, their actual meaning, their intended meaning allowed *me* to see the signs in a new way. I began to reflect on artifacts that had become mundane: What did it mean to place a Black Lives Matter sign in my yard? What am I communicating to my neighbors? How am I signaling my own belonging, and how am I actively working to value Black lives? How are my actions measuring up to my words? What is the intersection between action and text? Our open conversations and genuine inquiry led me to wonder how I might position these artifacts as useful sites of inquiry and discussion in my communication courses.

The Intersection of Two Public Health Crises: Local and Global Communities

The dual public health crises of the COVID-19 pandemic and racism have created an unsustainable, dangerous environment. While these crises are tragic, literally life-threatening, they also offer a kairotic moment for understanding how communities come together and resist. As communication teachers, we can embrace this moment by examining, alongside our students, how communities engage in asynchronous, text-based conversations and explore the possibilities regarding how communities are coming together, and how they are resisting and speaking up during these crises, through the use of such commonplace artifacts as yard signs. If our goal is to help students recognize their belonging among a community of writers and readers, these artifacts present entry points for their own engagement and action, as well.

During the spring, summer, and winter of 2020 we were bound, as we had not previously been during my own lifetime, to our homes and our neighborhoods because of the pandemic and stay-at-home orders. The spaces of the classroom, the school building, and the workplace have been regulated to the space of our own homes. Like so many, I have spent the last year navigating ways to work, teach, and learn without the help of physical spaces that create important work/home life boundaries.

As we navigate these artifacts, we must also be aware of such blurred boundaries related to identities, space, and labor. On the one hand, it is productive and appropriate to challenge our own worldviews and spaces by disrupting our comfort zones and compartmentalization. For example, I reflect on how my experience as a mother impacts my research and teaching, and whether I should separate these identities completely. On the other hand, I want to respect boundaries that, when blurred, may further problems regarding labor and self-care. As such, I sometimes hesitate to ask my students to bring artifacts from their home communities into the classroom discussion. With these boundaries in mind, I suggest that yard signs offer a specific focal point to ground and center classroom conversations about home communities. Teachers can use yard signs as designated artifacts that facilitate difficult classroom dialogues while decentering individuals and focusing, instead, on values and positions (Ruiz-Mesa & Hunter, 2019). Further, yard signs can act as an artifact to focus classroom discussions of public

pedagogy and how, during this particular moment in time, communities are working to engage textual conversations that challenge power structures and dominant narratives (Holmes, 2016).

Yard Signs as Epideictic

While many of my own neighbors had already displayed various yard signs, I first noticed an increase in these artifacts at the start of the pandemic, with such messages as "Thank You Essential Workers!" and "We Are In This Together!" After the murder of George Floyd in May of 2020, the yard signs multiplied and changed to say things like "Justice for George" and "No Justice, No Peace." When viewed through the lens of epideictic rhetoric, such yard signs primarily strengthen and intensify adherence to shared values, rather than persuade an audience who disagrees with their message (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969). Yard signs that display the name of a local elementary school or political candidate do similar work: they signal group belonging and quietly celebrate institutions or values *already* celebrated by the target audience (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969). When I choose to place a yard sign in my yard, I am participating in a silent community conversation potentially only noticed by those who already share my beliefs, who attend the same school, or support the same candidate. Like epideictic rhetoric, yard signs may intend to move an audience toward some action—support this school or vote for this candidate—but are generally aimed not at those with opposing beliefs, but at those who already support that school or candidate, whether or not they feel confident in their choice. The yard sign acts as epideictic rhetoric by creating community and strengthening adherence to already shared opinions or values.

Alongside messages that signal community belonging and that address others within that community, there are those that require the audience to supply additional context; the most compelling example from my own neighborhood is a sign in a local coffee shop window that reads "What if They Took Your Children?" Signs posing questions exemplify a distinct type of community engagement: rather than demand action, they invite reflection. At the same time, the way these signs are engaged with, and the context of their community and assumed readership is important to consider; in other words, do these signs engage neighbors who don't already believe or feel the same way about defunding the police, about opposing ICE detention centers, or about supporting the efforts of Black Lives Matter? Do these signs work to genuinely persuade or inform?

Shifting the Framework: Yard Signs as Entries Into Dialogue

Conversations with my son, who asked what it means to "say their names" or whose children had been taken, led me to reflect on how yard signs are appropriate, kairotic artifacts to engage our students in communication courses. My son engaged earnestly; from his own context, he asked open, honest questions with the desire to understand. As an adult who already understands the context and who has already aligned myself with various political and social justice movements, I read the signs differently. To me, the signs had only been epideictic; to him, they were entry points into inquiry and understanding.

My son's earnest questions, which only happened because of these yard signs, forced me out of my own space of privilege and isolation. My subsequent research on ways to talk to White children about structural racism teach *me* and inspire an iterative process of reflection, more research, more conversation, and action. In this way, the yard signs act as public pedagogy in my own home; but would these same yard signs have had this impact if we were not confined to our smaller neighborhood space, or if we had other places to go, like driving or bussing to school, work, activities, and so forth? In this sense, the pandemic

is kairotic. Much has been written already about how working remotely and staying at home intersected with the global protests in response to police killing; the murder of George Floyd was not the first instance of police murder in Minneapolis, not by far, but it was the first to happen during a pandemic when neighbors are more likely able to organize and focus on community engagement and organized action.

The moment in time when our worlds are both more localized and more expansive creates an opportunity for engaging our students in activities and projects that focus on or stem from their neighborhoods and communities. Centering local community engagement in these little neighborhood pockets, and then bringing that engagement out into the wider world of the classroom, has the potential to create a web of connections and to enact the local/global dichotomy/dissonance/dualism that we inhabit.

Holmes (2016) frames public pedagogy as “an approach to the teaching of writing that values the educative potential for public sites, communities, and persons beyond the boundaries of the traditional classroom and/or campus community” (p. 4). While much of public pedagogy focuses on bringing the classroom into the community, I see yard signs as meaningful artifacts that teachers can use to bridge the gap between community and classroom, in this moment when that gap is both wider and narrower through virtual learning. Holmes revisits the importance of “location” in her text, and I echo that attention to location and context. Yard signs exist in a specific context, tied to the location of their neighborhood. As such, they speak to a potentially narrow audience: neighbors moving through these locations on foot who might notice them in passing.

Holmes (2016) gestures toward the type of learning and engagement that takes place in public spheres as often particularly challenging, and the work of integrating public engagement into writing courses as emotionally difficult work. Yard signs, then, as artifacts that are removed from any one individual while retaining their identity as part of a community, are useful sites of engagement. Especially now, as students are confined to their own homes and local communities, we can use these artifacts to engage one another and to practice reflection and inquiry while navigating emotionally difficult topics.

These artifacts—neighborhood yard signs—provide an opportunity to bridge the gap between academic institutions and communities; further, they provide an opportunity for university communication courses to invite students to reflect upon and engage public dialogue happening in their home communities. Holmes (2016) claims that public pedagogies “attempt to shift the loci of power and authority, positioning students and community partners as teachers and teachers as learners, blurring traditionally defined roles” (p. 150). As education communities shift to online, and as students and teachers navigate the various limitations of working from home, we might use this opportunity to stretch the definition of public pedagogy to include opening up dialogues with our students about the ways in which their communities are already working to establish and shift authority and how we might blur and complicate the roles of teacher and learner. Yard signs present useful entry points to such inquiry. Presenting yard signs as central artifacts of discussion and reflection can root more theoretical conversations in immediate, material, tangible sites of community engagement.

Yard Signs and Inquiry in the Communication Classroom

Using the best practices outlined by Ruiz-Mesa and Hunter (2019), we can use yard signs as artifacts of public pedagogy and ask students to engage signs they encounter in their own neighborhoods. These signs opened up “difficult dialogues” with my young children during our walks both because of the content

of our discussions and because their questions challenged my own biases, assumptions, and knowledge. Ruiz-Mesa and Hunter (2019) advocate "focusing on the discourse, not the discussant," and "clearly reiterating that an idea/perspective is separate from the speaker," in their best practices that emphasize the importance of difficult discussions around often polarizing topics in a communication classroom (p. 139). They outline 10 best practices that work to build classroom community and that demonstrate "that sometimes communities disagree; however, they continue to support one another" (p. 140). While I do not outline all 10 of their best practices here, I encourage using them to facilitate conversations with students about yard signs and their own interactions with such signs in their communities. I particularly encourage these guidelines that help focus conversations on values and specific moments in time in order to help students reflect on and engage their own values as they align with or bump up against such displays of community engagement.

Asking students to spend 30 minutes walking around in their own local community spaces and to note any yard signs presents a timely and productive way for students to engage such topical, difficult conversations that Ruiz-Mesa and Hunter (2019) present in their article in a way that lends itself to both engaging difficult positions and ideas while also separating individuals from these ideas. Students can ask questions such as "What values do these/does this sign evoke? What do I know about the context of both this specific artifact and the context of its message? If I don't know the meaning or political/social/physical/cultural context of a sign, how can I begin to investigate that? How does this message signal a type of group belonging? To whom is this artifact speaking? Does this message invite conversation or inquiry? What dominant beliefs or practices does this message challenge? How does this message either align with or disrupt my worldview?"

Teachers can follow the best practices laid out by Ruiz-Mesa and Hunter (2019) to facilitate these conversations with students; in many ways, these artifacts lend themselves to difficult conversations because they materially separate the belief or idea from any one individual. In other words, communication teachers can have difficult conversations without asking their students to cross boundaries and reveal their own positions or beliefs; the conversations can focus on the artifacts. These signs are printed texts, often utilizing elements of design, color, images alone or with text, that engage a public conversation absent an individual orator. While they are associated with a home or business, they are immediately removed from any one person, and rather than engaging another person in a real-time conversation, these artifacts invite a more reflective and nuanced engagement, one that centers around asking questions. With the instructor as guide, these artifacts can be positioned as both epideictic rhetoric, signaling belonging or group identification and amplifying already shared values, and also as entryways for explorative research and invitations for self-reflection.

Next Steps and Considerations

Engaging moments of public debate and communication can be difficult, particularly when these debates include emotionally charged topics (Holmes, 2016; Ruiz-Mesa & Hunter, 2019). At the same time, engaging in these conversations while creating a safe space and sense of community are important, particularly considering that our students are already existing and making sense of how these dual public health crises impact their daily lives; their education practices and environments; and their ability to connect and communicate with their neighbors, family, and friends. As communication instructors, we can reposition yard signs as kairotic artifacts that allow us to engage difficult conversations with a focus on inquiry rather than debate. Leading with questions, modeling reflection and earnest research, and

facilitating exploration of the yard signs that students encounter in their own communities can help to foster our learning communities during a shift to online instruction.

While this shift has the potential to increase isolation from communities of learning, I hope that my reflections offer a way to leverage the affordances of both increased community engagement and on increased confinement to our home spaces. Communication instructors can help to frame dissonance and unknowns as generative entries into research, as Young et al. (1970) do in their text. Students can respond to these artifacts with questions that interrogate their own positionalities and prior knowledge while celebrating the ways that they are already engaged in making meaning in and with their communities.

As we slowly emerge from the pandemic, as universities reopen or plan to reopen, and as cities continue to do the difficult work of rebuilding and fighting police brutality and racism, bringing public signs into the communication classroom continues to be a useful way for students to analyze how such texts engage their communities. While I initially considered yard signs a particularly useful artifact during stay-at-home orders and when attempting to build community in online courses, it can be a useful exercise for teachers to ask students to engage such community artifacts in face-to-face conversations, as well. Further, teachers might ask students to specifically engage or find artifacts on campus that engage various communities. I see, as the most useful way to bring such artifacts into the communication classroom, approaching these signs as entry points into research and as ways to engage conversations that students are not already participating in.

To encourage such reflective work, communication instructors must continually reframe such artifacts as potential ways to open up, rather than shut down conversations. Further, communication teachers should be wary of the ways in which their students encounter and engage various messages and be prepared to step in when necessary in order to preserve the safe space of the classroom. Not all artifacts will be useful or safe or generative; communication teachers can encourage students to consider the questions: "Who is being called to action here? Whom does this message engage? Whom does this message aim to help? Whom does this message aim to harm?" Finally, communication instructors might engage students in conversations about how increased attention to local surroundings due to travel restrictions and an increase in working and learning from home create opportunities for community engagement and conversations; together with students, teachers can interrogate the ways in which yard signs participate in such ongoing conversations and whether or how yard signs might function beyond epideictic toward openness and learning.

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