

Where We Are: #MeToo and Academia

“Where We Are” highlights where we are as a field on matters current and compelling. This section brings together a small group of scholars at the forefront of a particular issue or practice to issue a progress report in 800-1200 words. –Editor’s Note

Beyond a Hashtag: Considering Campus Policies in the Age of #MeToo

Laura Rosche

On October 15, 2017, actress Alyssa Milano tweeted a call for women who have been victims of sexual assault and harassment to speak out about their experiences, making #MeToo viral. However, Tarana Burke, who founded the movement over a decade ago, reminds us that #MeToo “is beyond a hashtag. It’s the start of a larger conversation and a movement for radical community healing” (emphasis added). Burke’s call for a “larger conversation” about sexual violence challenges us—participants, observers, and critics—to treat sexual violence as a social issue, one that can only be resolved through prolonged, meaningful discourse that leads to action. Though the objectives of the movement are many, what I find most significant for the field of composition is not Milano’s call for disclosure, but Burke’s insistence upon the need for discussion. The #MeToo movement implores us to treat sexual violence as a public problem, but what does that mean for the field of composition? For our classrooms? How do we make sure that #MeToo goes “beyond a hashtag” at our institutions so that we continue the “larger conversation” about sexual violence in our learning environments?

With 230 universities currently under investigation for possible mishandling of Title IX cases, the problem of sexual violence on college campuses demands attention (“Title IX: Tracking Sexual Assault Investigations”). The topic, however, is not often discussed in our composition classrooms. While our syllabi may include information about Title IX and offer the contact information of campus resources that help victims of sexual assault and harassment, a larger discussion about its relevance in our students’ lives is generally lacking. It is not as if we are unprepared to address complex and unsettling social issues in our classrooms, though. Since the 1980s, cultural studies has influenced composition pedagogies, challenging instructors to ask “students to move their investigations [of language] out of the classroom” to discuss complicated issues such as race relations, gender biases, and ableism (George,

et al. 105). This pedagogical approach asks students to analyze the ways in which language influences and is influenced by culture; it challenges students to think about the ideologies implicit in their everyday discourse; and it forces them to grapple with uncomfortable realities about the oppression they witness, experience, and may even be a part of. So why do we so often leave out texts and discussions about sexual violence when we can ask students to engage with that topic in similar ways? Is it that we think students are less willing to participate in conversations about sexual violence than in discussions about other cultural issues, or is it a reflection of university attitudes and policies? Unfortunately, I'm compelled to think the latter.

In December 2017, Glen Retief, an Associate Professor of English and Creative Writing at Susquehanna University, published an article in *Inside Higher Ed* that addresses the ways in which Title IX's mandatory-reporting requirements are negatively affecting university writing classrooms. This policy requires faculty members who have been designated as "Responsible Employees" to contact their Title IX office if a student discloses a sexual assault to them. This policy demands faculty report on behalf of their student even if the assault happened years ago, even if the student has worked through it in counseling, even if they ask us not to report. Retief writes that though this mandatory-reporting policy has had a "stifling effect" on his students when it comes to working with texts that address sexual assault or harassment, it appears to also impact instructors' willingness to approach such topics in their classrooms in the first place. Many instructors—myself included—feel uncomfortable with the requirement to report a student's experience of sexual violence. There are, of course, exceptions; if a student is in immediate danger, I want to offer all the help I can to keep them safe. However, if my class is discussing the rhetorical differences of identifying as a "sexual assault survivor" rather than a "sexual assault victim" and a student shares her own experience with sexual violence as a child—violence that happened years before she ever arrived on campus—I do not feel comfortable reporting the incident to my university's Title IX officer. The very possibility that I might have to do so has kept me from talking more candidly with my students about the rhetoric of sexual violence in my own composition classroom. Though the mandatory-reporting requirement does not, on the surface, make talking about sexual violence in our classrooms more difficult, it does have an impact on our willingness to do so if we value sexual assault survivors' right to self-determined disclosure. But, if we do not analyze sexual violence in our classrooms as we would racial injustices or ableist rhetorics, how can we expect its prevalence in our society to lessen? If we do not treat sexual violence as a topic we can learn and ask questions about, as a problem we can address through discourse, how will #MeToo ever move, as Burke urges, "beyond a hashtag"?

Despite the university policies in place that may make us hesitant to discuss sexual violence in our classrooms, I do think there is a way for composition instructors and students to participate in the “larger conversation” that #MeToo encourages; however, just as we ask our students to do in their assignments, we must work within the constraints of our rhetorical situation. For example, when we include information about Title IX on our syllabi, we can also outline what it means for faculty to be designated as mandatory-reporters, and we can discuss how we imagine that impacting our classroom dynamics. We can welcome discussion about and disclosure of sexual violence, while making sure that students understand the agency they have when participating in both. When we provide the contact information of resources for victims of sexual violence, we can include on- and off-campus options so as to encourage the treatment of sexual violence as a public issue. We can invite students into the conversation about sexual violence by asking them to treat university policies as objects of rhetorical analysis. We can, beyond the classroom, advocate for university policies that make easier our ability to talk about sexual violence with our students. We have options. We can talk about this, and—as the #MeToo movement suggests—we must.

Works Cited

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