

## **Toward a More Inclusive First-Year Writing Curriculum: Empowering Students**

By:

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*“What should young people do with their lives today? Many things, obviously. But the most daring thing is to create stable communities in which the terrible disease of loneliness can be cured.” -Kurt Vonnegut*

**Purpose:** Empowering students with the authority to choose the class textbook so as to foster community, create a more inclusive curriculum, and meet the changing criteria of the course.

**Definition of the Problem:** We teach Writing in the Digital Age, a required Foundation English course that explores the ongoing cultural, technological, and social changes that impact our ways of reading and writing. We offer space in the course for students to voice their varying points of view but want to empower our students with more opportunities for engagement and curricular autonomy. In particular, we want our course text to better meet the needs of our student body. Our text for the 2015/16-2017/18 academic years served as a definitional source, appropriate for American students not yet instructed in rhetorical strategy. We learned from both students and faculty that the book offered few pathways for international students and did not compel discourse for multiple challenging perspectives. Both students and faculty determined that the course needs a common text that addresses the global community—our students that come from different continents, speak different languages, grow up in varying socioeconomic backgrounds, and bring starkly contrasting social conventions to the classroom. We also need a text that offers faculty ways to infuse the curriculum with more culturally sensitive material.

**Proposed Solution:** Rather than this selection process be a top-down measure, we decided to authorize the students with the power to decide the course text for the incoming foundation students, Class of 2022. In passing on this responsibility to current and past students of the course, we hoped to address the principles of *curricular inclusion, student empowerment, and community*.

**Curricular Inclusion:** We were encouraged by the emphasis on student empowerment in our research on determining course curriculum—in particular, Suanne Gibson and Joanna Haynes’s *Perspectives on Participation and Inclusion; Engaging Education*. While their work comes out of the UK, their criticism of neoliberal ideology valuing sameness over difference and their philosophies on the cultivation of inclusion through all levels of building curriculum mirrors the work we set out to do with our OARS grant: “education becomes a transformative and positive experience for all as opposed to an exclusionary

process, where commitments to equality and diversity are not just respected ideas but enacted practices”(Gibson, Hayes 1). While we had concerns about maintaining the integrity of the course learning objectives, our desire for a more democratic course design superseded our anxieties.

**Student Empowerment:** We theorized that empowering the students with the responsibility of deciding the text offered meaningful participation, engagement that yielded a tangible, consequential outcome, more so than requesting that students participate for the sake of participation itself. Giving students a measure of autonomy over the curriculum also aligns with the student-centered ethos we embody in Liberal Arts & Sciences.

Vincent Tong’s *Shaping Higher Education with Students: Ways to Connect Research and Teaching* speaks to how this level of participation can change student perceptions: students do not merely take control in the classroom with a vote, voice, and decision-making power, but they have material outcomes—forming the educational path of their fellow students, passing on what they’ve learned to the rising foundation class. When their work results in more than just a grade, students take ownership and have more confidence in their degrees (Tong, et al. 55).

**Community:** We also looked forward to strengthening our community of learners. We set out to create an activity that let students conduct informal research on course literature, offering spaces for discourse with peers. But it was important for us to create an environment that struck a balance between informal and formal study—allowing students to feel relaxed and secure enough to voice their opinions but also providing structured content, guided instructions for connecting texts with course concepts while fostering a community for incoming foundation students.

To strengthen our community in the classroom, we need to know our students. Vanderbilt graduate fellow Rhett Mcdaniel’s manual *Increasing Inclusivity in the Classroom* highlights the importance of knowing student perspectives, skills, experiences, and ideas when building a course (Mcdaniel). That’s why we foregrounded our student focus groups with student surveys, asking students their reading preferences, English background, and their opinions about the hierarchy of course concepts like rhetoric, media, technology, and writing. We in turn used this survey data, along with the surveys of our faculty, to select possible texts for the students to choose from.

We believe community in the classroom grows best in a relaxed environment, so when designing our student focus groups, the events where the students debated and eventually voted on a course text, we used the low-stakes technique of ‘speed dating’ with the literature, having students rotate with books for ten-minute increments. We posited that this activity, along with pizza, would produce an atmosphere that was censorship free, encouraging critical thinking and brainstorming with no wrong answers.

In sum, we underpinned our student book selection process itself with an attention towards fostering community, incorporating our research on inclusivity at every level of

class construction: “When instructors attempt to create safe, inclusive classrooms, they should consider multiple factors, including the syllabus, course content, class preparation, their own behavior, and their knowledge of students’ backgrounds and skills” (Mcdaniel). With the student and faculty surveys, student focus groups, and course texts that embrace a more global student body, we hoped to bring together varying cultural contexts and levels of proficiency and instill a more democratic, open-minded process in determining the education of our students.

**The Process:** This process of employing the students to select a text for the course required five stages: *Student Survey*, *Faculty Survey*, *Initial Book Selection*, *Student Focus Groups*, and *Final Student Vote*.

### **Stage 1: WITDA Textbook Student Survey – 94 responses**

As our primary goal was to get student input on new textbook options, we started by putting together a Google Form survey that we then asked faculty to have their students complete during the Fall 2017 semester. 94 students completed the survey. See responses listed below:

Question 1: Are you a native English speaker?

- 81.9% Native English Speakers
- 18.1% Non-native speakers

Question 2: What is your racial/ethnic background? Check all that apply:

- 38.7% White
- 37.6% Asian
- 22.6% Latino / Hispanic
- 10.8% African-American
- 4.3% Other
- 2.2% Native-American

Question 3: Tell us a bit more about your background. Check all that apply:

- 79.8% got good grades in English in the past
- 67% wrote several essays per semester at previous school
- 41.5% read novels for pleasure
- 40.4% read the news for pleasure
- 33% Took AP English in HS
- 28.7% Took College English courses pre-Otis
- 25.5% read nonfiction books for pleasure

Question 4: What genres do you enjoy reading? Check all that apply:

- 77.7% fiction
- 57.4% fantasy / sci fi
- 44.7% current events / news
- 40.4% nonfiction

Question 5: What are your thoughts on the Understanding Rhetoric textbook? Check all that apply:

- 62.8% enjoyed graphic novel format
- 44.7% thought it fit well with the goals of the class
- 40.4% thought it taught them new things
- 26.6% thought it was preparing them to write Argument Essay
- 19.1% thought it was preparing them to compose MM

Question 6: Having taken Writing in the Digital Age, what elements do you think any future textbook for the class should incorporate? Check all that apply:

- 60.6% pop culture
- 57.4% media
- 55.3% diversity
- 48.9% rhetoric
- 43.6% fundamentals of composition (grammar, mech etc)
- 39.4% technology
- 39.4% social sciences (philosophy, human behavior etc)
- 38.3% multiculturalism
- 38.3% graphic novel format
- 23.4% anthology with articles written by multiple authors
- 23.4% narrative nonfiction
- 22.3% fiction
- 9.6% book written by one author

Question 7: Optional: Do you have any additional comments about Understanding Rhetoric or about another possible textbook? (NOTE: These are representative of all the comments we got to this question.)

- “It was a fun way to learn, but the information in the book I felt was knowledge that we had already learned during high school.”
- “Understanding Rhetoric is one of the hardest textbooks to follow that i have used in my educational career. the formating is very very difficult to stay engaged with because of this format. Because of having dyslexia it is a difficult style of a textbook to read and respond to. Most of the time students wouldn't even bother doing the readings because it is repetitive of what we learned in high school. it makes it hard to apply this to a creative career and i think the focus of the next text book should be either more applicable for a career stand point.”
- “I have learned Rhetoric for an entire year in high school yet when I read this book it failed horribly to teach rhetoric in an effective way. The information in the book doesn't reflect rhetoric in the right way.”

## **Stage 2: WITDA Textbook Faculty Survey – 6 responses**

In late Fall 2017, we put together another Google Forms survey for faculty currently teaching WITDA or faculty who had taught it in the past. 6 faculty members responded. See their responses listed below:

Question 1: What were your overall thoughts on Understanding Rhetoric? Check all that apply:

- 66.7% thought it prepared students to write Argument Essay
- 33.3% thought graphic novel format was effective
- 33.3% thought it fit well with goals of the class
- 16.7% thought it taught students new things
- 0% thought it prepared students to compose MM

Question 2: Having taught Writing in the Digital Age, what elements do you think any future course text for the class should incorporate? Check all that apply:

- 100% rhetoric
- 83.3% media
- 83.3% pop culture
- 83.3% technology
- 66.7% diversity
- 33.3% narrative nonfiction
- 16.7% multiculturalism
- 16.7% fiction
- 16.7% fundamentals of composition (grammar, mech etc.)
- 16.7% social sciences
- 0% entirely by one author / 0% anthology by multiple authors

Question 3: Do you have any additional comments about what type of text would suit our curriculum and the learning objectives of the class? (NOTE: These are representative of all the comments we got to this question.)

- “Contemporary Issues and Academic readings that touch on issues relevant to the students and world today.”
- “I think a collection of essays or articles (similar to Signs of Life) is ideal or even something similar to Ariely's Predictably Irrational. I don't think we need a book about writing / rhetoric. The faculty know enough about that to lecture on it on their own. What we need is a memorable book with some great essays and articles to provoke critical thinking and class discussion.”
- “We could get a nonfiction narrative about one of our course topics and have accompanying articles about rhetoric. I would love anthology too - the students don't love those at first, but they really are the best for this type of class.”

Question 4: Do you have any book suggestions for the class—either specific titles or authors? (NOTE: These are representative of all the comments we got to this question.)

- “Work from authors who deal with contemporary issues that have been published in the last 8 to 10 years.”

- “Perhaps something by Malcom Gladwell? Or Jonah Berger? This collection of readers from Oxford Univ Press looks interesting!  
<https://global.oup.com/ushe/disciplines/english/composition-courses/readers-thematic/?cc=us&lang=en&>”
- "Creating Freedom" by Raoul Martinez; Violent Borders by Reece Jones; "Connectivity" by Parag Khanna Bunk by Kevin Young (or something like it); Being Wrong by Kathryn Shultz (or something like it). Neil Gabler "Life the Movie"

### Stage 3: Initial Book Selection

The student survey results that most determined our initial selection of texts for the students to chose from was Question 6: *Having taken Writing in the Digital Age, what elements do you think any future textbook for the class should incorporate?* The topics most important to students (in descending order of significance) were 60.6% pop culture, 57.4% media, 55.3% diversity, 43.6% fundamentals of composition. We were gratified to learn that students put the themes of the course before their reading preferences (the most popular reading material being fiction and sci-fi).

These results mirror the results of the faculty survey with some variation. The topics most important to faculty (in descending order of significance) were 100% rhetoric, 83.3% pop culture, 83.3% media, 83.3% technology, 66.7% diversity. Faculty saw more importance in rhetoric and technology, while students saw a greater need for fundamentals of composition. Both groups valued pop culture, media, and diversity as significant elements.

Based on this data from both surveys, we selected the following texts:

***Hit Makers, Derek Thompson***: Author Derek Thompson is a millennial and senior editor at Atlantic Monthly. His narrative nonfiction book covers most topics from student and faculty survey results, most notably pop culture, media, rhetoric, and technology. Thompson addresses issues of corporate iconography as a mode of rhetoric as well as the global community’s participation in making popular culture. We also felt the book aligns with the course concept of multimodality, thus offering faculty pathways for relevant lesson plans.

***The Attention Merchants, Tim Wu***: Tim Wu, professor of Columbia Law School, writes from a business and law background but with a journalistic and narrative bent. He covers VR, Facebook, Google—topics our students often write about in their research papers for the course. Like Thompson’s *Hit Makers*, *The Attention Merchants* embraces a modern approach to rhetoric. Wu’s focus on the foundation of the advertising industry and the commodification of human attention overlaps with the course concepts of rhetoric, media, technology, and popular culture. This book explains why the mediascape works the way it does, outlining the forces behind technological innovation (namely commerce) while employing both storytelling and academic research, a blending of rhetorical modes we ask our students to utilize.

***Readers for Writers; Food, Culture, & Humor, Oxford University Press:*** We selected these anthologies as a more traditional textbook option. Each essay collection focuses on a particular theme. We offered students samples from the Food, Humor, and Culture anthologies and told them how we planned on offering faculty and students a chance to decide on their text theme for the semester. Other theme titles in the series include Technology, Globalization, and Creativity. The range of articles coupled with the instruction on composition and research offers both students and teachers support for their classwork. The anthologies include works by authors like Pico Iyer, Clara Sue Kidwel, David Foster Wallace, David Sedaris, and Zadie Smith.

***Ethics in the Real World, Peter Singer:*** This collection of brief essays by philosopher Peter Singer offers examples of debate, rhetorical writing, and logic. Singer drills down on popular yet provocative topics like decriminalization of drugs and the outlawing of smoking and more existential questions like the meaning of life. We felt the frank approach to sensitive material would appeal to students. Singer also establishes a distinct point of view, deliberately and explicitly stating his position as he dissects what he deems popular yet irrational thinking—skills we’d like our students to master in college.

#### **Stage 4: Student Focus Groups**

Once we had our list of potential textbooks, we scheduled two hour-long lunchtime focus groups in late Spring 2018 (March 29 & 30) with current and past WITDA students to get a feel for their thoughts on the options for new textbooks. We announced the focus groups in our classes and forwarded announcements to other faculty so they could help us recruit students to participate. We also put up a sign-up sheet on the wall outside the LAS office. A total of 22 students participated during the two days.

During the focus groups, we had students rotate among four different tables, each with hard copies of book options as well as photocopied book excerpts. We gave them roughly 10 minutes to interact with each of the four options.

To guide students during the focus group sessions, we put together a handout asking them to jot down feedback regarding pros and cons for each of the four textbook options. Here are some of the responses for each book option:

#### **Book #1: *Hit Makers* by Derek Thompson**

##### Pros

- “I like this book. It’s really relevant and interesting. It’s not boring. And the concept [is] easy to understand.”
- “Has relatable (well-known) examples so students can read the text with interest.”
- “It’s easy to read and has no interference from overcrowded images...”
- “...it is related to the topic of art.”
- “It seems to be more than English class reading. It seems like a book that I’d actually want to read on my own.”

Cons

- “Not familiar with some words.”
- “Too long, lengthy”
- “[no] pictures. Not really needed, but nice to explain visually.”
- “So far, no real theories on rhetoric and the effects on people.”
- “Would like more educational details.”

**Book #2: *Attention Merchants* by Tim Wu**

Pros

- “Has good informative points about how aspects of our pop culture came to be.”
- “Well thought out and researched.”
- “Interesting subjects.”
- “Uses modern references to get point across. Easy to read. Relevant.”
- “A great way for us to learn where we come from social media wise. A great way to understand how we are manipulated.”

Cons

- “Kinda boring writing style.”
- “No pictures or diagrams.”
- “I am not really interest[ed] in the topic of this book.”
- “The level of writing seems a bit advanced. Might be too difficult for non-English speakers.”
- “Some people might want a book that makes them think more than a history lesson.”

**Book #3: 3 Oxford Readers for Writers on topics of a) *Humor* b) *Food* and c) *Culture***

Pros

- “I think this is a good way to learn.”
- “I’m really interest[ed] in some topic[s] of this book.”
- “Lots of diversity and range.”
- “The titles of ‘Humor,’ ‘Culture,’ and ‘Food’ are fun right off the bat.”
- “Like the idea of different teacher with different books (for the most part).”

Cons

- “Having different books [in different classes] is confusing.”
- “I don’t think [it has] enough association with this class.”
- “Not sure if students would have options to choose a topic they’re interested in.”
- “Debate is too distracting won’t really talk about rhetoric or school stuff.”

**Book #4: *Ethics in the Real World* by Peter Singer**

Pros

- “An interesting approach to discussing, dissecting current events.”



- “The [articles] in this book are short, so I have patience to finish reading [them].”
- “This would open students’ mind[s] by challenging their worldviews.”
- “Talks about online / internet cultures even the more iffy subjects which is great. Many people our age are aware of these subjects but very rarely can we talk about [them].”

#### Cons

- “Biased.”
- “I do not know how it teaches rhetoric or how to write.”
- “Might be too general...”
- “It’s gross.”

After the round table sessions, we spent about 10 minutes having an open discussion with students about their reactions to each book. We then collected their handouts.

#### **Stage 5: Final Student Vote**

Based on the feedback from our focus groups, the decision was nearly unanimous: *Hit Makers* by Derek Thompson. We were very pleased that students seemed to echo all of our thoughts on the book: it’s catchy, easy to read, relevant, and the subject matter connects to the work of artists and designers.

**Conclusions:** When creating our foundational curriculum, we set out to include our student body in the decision making process. The course, Writing in the Digital Age, already gives students the freedom to delve into any topic of interest for research projects, but it is more grounded in issues relevant to our students if we utilize student opinion for course design. This book selection also provides an academic community by offering foundation students the shared experience of a common textbook.

We were gratified to empower our students and to encourage them to have autonomy over their education. We witnessed students using the course literature and research as an opportunity not only for study but for communion with classmates and for self expression. The knowledge that their work had a tangible outcome—a book for the incoming freshman—built student confidence, assuring them that they had acquired the skills from the course and could share that knowledge with future classmates.

**In the surveys, we learned** about our students’ backgrounds. Knowing the make-up of the class—how many students have taken rhetoric in an AP high school or college class; how many students speak English as a foreign language—helps us adjust our lesson plans. Learning what topics students feel most important to the course—media, popular culture, diversity, and composition—in comparison and contrast to what our faculty see as the most significant elements—media, popular culture, diversity, technology and rhetoric—not only aids us in selecting reading material and developing lesson plans, but also informs us on how to best structure our class for upcoming semesters. If the students don’t see rhetoric and technology as an important element of the course, does this mean we need to better emphasize these topics? Or does it mean we should reevaluate the

relevancy of these concepts? These are questions we will ask ourselves as we continue to construct and revise course material.

**In the student focus groups we learned** what texts the students thought matched the course criteria. Our fears that students would value personal preference over the course learning outcomes were never realized—they chose the book we would have chosen. We also learned that art and design students use visual criteria when evaluating texts. They were interested in the design of the book: “[no] pictures. Not really needed, but nice to explain visually.”; “No pictures or diagrams.” They were also more concerned than faculty with the level of difficulty: “The level of writing seems a bit advanced. Might be too difficult for non-English speakers.” Lastly, we were pleased to hear the students express a joy of reading: “It seems to be more than English class reading. It seems like a book that I’d actually want to read on my own.”

This grant afforded community building across student-to-student, student-to-faculty, and faculty-to-faculty lines. The more democratic approach to curricular decisions allows students to have a vested interest in the classroom, nurtures a growth mindset, and encourages a collaborative approach to learning. We look forward to more student-teacher partnerships in creating our curriculum.

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