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Open Educational Resources in a Core A2 Pilot

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Summary

This report compiles student insight of particular Open Educational Resources (OER) incorporated into a Rhetoric and Language (R&L) course pilot. Using OER textbooks not only reduced costs for students, but also encouraged students to take ownership in the text assessment process. The views expressed by students through reading reflections, class discussions, and survey feedback created ample information for deciding whether particular texts or readings were a good fit for the course moving forward. While the final decisions around whether to include these texts in future courses, or in a textbook designed specifically for this upper division course, remain to be made, the opportunity to include students in the decision making process was essential, especially as the course pilot extends into a second round and ultimate development of a culminating course in the Rhetoric and Language core curriculum sequence. These findings will be shared with the Department of Rhetoric and Language as well as appearing in this report.

Overview of OER Project

In applying for the open educational resources grant, I had hoped to explore OER software and do professional development in this area. Although I did attend a professional development session led by Professor Jonathan Hunt, and researched additional materials via TK, I found that my second goal in the grant proposal—developing materials for the new upper division course being developed by the Department of Rhetoric and Language—to be more immediately pressing as the pilot for the course rolled out.

Prior to piloting the course, I had the opportunity to join the current department chair for Rhetoric and Language, Cathy Gabor, in two discussions with textbook developers to consider the needs of this new upper division course. The hope is to provide instructors the option to use a text designed specifically for the course; however, we have also discussed using a combination of texts to create an open source reader that could be available to faculty at this university and beyond.

In preparing to pilot this new course for the Department of Rhetoric and Language in Fall 2019, I opted to explore existing open educational resources rather than request that students purchase one of the recommended (by the department) texts for this course level. The hope was to find texts that promote student engagement and interaction, while reducing costs for the students. This approach allowed students to engage with a variety of readings at little to no cost to themselves. In addition, I was able to test-run two textbooks that had been recommended in multiple circumstances without the risk of ordering a bunch of books that may be only half-read. This option was also more environmentally-friendly and sustainable. Rather than adding to my ever-growing pile of outdated textbooks, I could choose to use the same texts, or not, the next time I taught the course.

Student input in this process was a key factor in this project. By using OER texts, I hoped to enlist the students in the assessment of the texts to determine whether each was a good fit for the course level and design moving forward. Considering the Jesuit mission of USF, the student-centric

learning focus of our teaching, and the departmental goal of eloquentia perfecta, this project looked at how the students engaged with the texts and captured their insights and opinions on each of the readings. The specific reading choices and student insights are shared here.

The Pilot Course

Within the Department of Rhetoric and Language, this pilot course was part of an ongoing new curriculum roll out. The new curriculum design was the result of over five years of research and planning with the overall hope of simplifying the course sequence, integrating different forms of communication into each course offering, and making the overall Rhetoric course experience more equitable for our student population as whole. As part of this curriculum change, a long-term goal is to move the curriculum vertical, so students take one Composition or Public Speaking class per academic school year until the sequence is complete. The course being piloted this semester would serve as the culminating course in the sequence and fulfill the Core A2 requirement for graduation. As this course was designed to be taken in the student's junior or senior year at USF, the best way to mimic those circumstances within our existing course structure was to pilot the class with the Transfer student courses (Rhet 250/295). While still a work-in-progress, the primary goals of this pilot course were to integrate speaking, writing and digital communication approaches in an environment that allows students to explore the communication in their chosen discipline or field of study.

The Course Sections

Most of the course sections for this stage of the pilot were selected by convenience—the instructors who were part of the New Curriculum Committee and volunteered to teach the pilot in their scheduled sections of Rhetoric 250 or 295. Both Rhetoric 250 and 295 are designated for Transfer-students only (with some exceptions due to student class scheduling needs/challenges).

In addition to teaching the pilot in my section of Rhetoric 250, I chose to infuse the pilot requirements into my other Core A2 course: Rhetoric 120. Rhetoric 120 is the current culminating course in the sequence. With occasional exceptions, the student population in Rhet 120 tends to be continuing students who have taken the prerequisite courses at this university. Successful completion of any of the above mention courses fulfills the Core A2 required cognate.

The Students

For Rhet 250, the students were all transfer students, with most having completed at least one writing or public speaking course at another college prior to coming to USF. At the start of the semester, the course had 19 students. As the weeks progressed, three students dropped the course for various reasons. The ratio of female to male students was 10:6 (as identified by the students themselves). The college class breakdown was as follows: Seniors (1), Juniors (8), Sophomore (5), Freshmen (2). Two were international students, with permanent residences in their home countries, and one identified herself as an immigrant to the US. A few students discussed being among the first in their family to attend college.

For Rhet 120, the students were predominantly continuing USF students; however, four were categorized as transfer students. At the start of the semester, there was much shuffling of enrollment in this section. Students came and went, added or dropped, with some of the small group work being greatly affected. Efforts to create steady workshop groups were ongoing and challenging. The final roster said 18 students were enrolled, however two students were late semester withdrawals due to lack of attendance or submission of work. The ratio of female to

male students was 11:7 (as identified by the students themselves). The college class breakdown was as follows: Seniors (1), Juniors (3), Sophomore (12), Freshmen (2). Three were international students, with permanent residences in their home countries; multiple spoke about immigrant family members or being among the first in their family to attend college.

Cost of living in San Francisco/Bay Area was a frequent discussion among the students, particularly among those who were commuting or considering moves to be closer to campus. Students were also frustrated about the recent discussion around tuition increases. Given these cost-centric communications, providing free textbooks was a bonus in both classes.

Course Learning Outcomes

The learning outcomes for the Fall 2019 pilot course sections were a combination of existing Core A2 learning outcomes and new pilot learning outcomes.

The existing Core A2 outcomes were created by the Department of Rhetoric and Language and approved in a process involving the university Core Curriculum Committee, among other entities. These outcomes allow students to fulfill the Rhetoric and Language half of the Foundations of Communication requirement toward graduation.

Existing Core A2 Outcomes

- 1) Critical analysis of academic discourse: Students critically analyze linguistic and rhetorical strategies used in long and complex texts from a variety of genres, subjects, and fields.
- 2) Integrating multiple academic sources: Students incorporate multiple texts of length and complexity within a unified argumentative essay, addressing connections and differences among them.
- 3) Academic research: Students develop sophisticated research questions and compose substantial arguments in response to those questions, incorporating extensive independent library research and demonstrating mastery of standard academic documentation modes.
- 4) Style: Students edit their own prose to achieve a clear and mature writing style in keeping with the conventions of academic and/or professional discourse.
- 5) Revision: Students develop their own revision strategies for extending and enriching early drafts and for producing polished advanced academic writing.

The additional Pilot Course Outcomes were developed by members of the Rhetoric and Language New Curriculum Committee (NCC). This process began during a teaching retreat hosted by The Tracy Seeley Center for Teaching Excellence at USF and continues in multiple meetings of the NCC. For purposes of the pilot, the outcomes were approved during a departmental meeting attended by the full time faculty in the department.

*Additional Pilot Course Outcomes**

- 1) Articulate their rhetorical choices and process.

- 2) Recognize (identify, analyze and practice) norms and conventions of genres of their discipline and others.
- 3) Compare/contrast rhetorical reading strategies across academic and public discourses (and modalities).
- 4) Contribute knowledge/experience/perspective in a way that's appropriate to a specific modality and scholarly or public conversation.
- 5) Compare/contrast texts from different fields of study and analyze the structure and expectations of said texts.

*Note that the Additional Pilot Course Outcomes ask the students to focus on the communication practices and modalities within their disciplines and how these bridge with public discourse.

Additional Requirements

These courses encouraged exploring, debating, and sharing knowledge with others. The work done in class asked students to: participate intelligently, read critically, take notes, review materials, and complete assignments on time. In addition, asking questions, reflecting on assignments, and incorporating materials into their work indicated familiarity with assigned material and efforts to link what happened in the course with the community of USF and beyond. The class was not a lecture, but an ongoing discussion. Each member took on the role of researcher/student/teacher in multiple instances throughout the semester.

The Texts

Bad Ideas about Writing, edited by Cheryl E. Ball & Drew M. Loewe
West Virginia University Libraries, Digital Publishing Institute, Morgantown, WV

Writing about Writing, by Elizabeth Wardle & Doug Downs
Bedford/St.Martin's, Boston, MA

These texts came highly recommended by colleagues and were made available to students in pdf form as well as via online links. Students could choose how they preferred to take notes. In the future, I may encourage the use of particular note taking applications or use a program such as hypothes.is for whole class interaction with particular texts.

The Role of the Texts

The chosen texts were a key part of the course requirements. Students read 10 different essays across the two books. They wrote a 1-2 page reflection for each, including a quote that resonated with them. Each reading was chosen to accompany the unit or a concept they were exploring. At times, this connection appeared obvious to them; at others, the connection or relevance was not so apparent. The students developed stronger opinions around the readings, or were more comfortable with sharing their opinions, as the semester progressed. Some of these insights were shared in the survey at the end of the semester—a selection of these viewpoints will be included in this report for each reading, as well as the students' overall takeaway on the value of the texts and whether the books or readings should be considered for future inclusion in this course.

The Survey

This survey was designed to be clear, quick and approachable, especially as the semester ended and the students were asked to provide feedback or evaluations multiple times for the same course. As the goal of the survey was to ascertain which readings the students believe should be included in future classes, the students were given the title of each reading and asked to select: “Keep it” or “Lose it.” They were then asked to explain their answer choice. Some students opted to provide little to no explanation for their answers. Other students chose to expound upon their answers at length. All students were encouraged to consult their reflections for each reading to remind them of the points or aspects of the writing that stood out to them as they read.

Survey Results

What follows is the list of the ten essays that were read by the students and the overall vote result on whether to “keep” or “lose” the essay in future sections of this course. The results were across both class sections. In the future, I might opt to separate the results to see if there was a significant difference between the transfer and continuing student insights.

For each essay, the title of essay (and textbook in which it appeared), vote result, and key comments will be shared.

Essay title: "Correct Way of Writing and Speaking" by Anjali Pattanayak (*Bad Ideas About Writing*)

Vote result: KEEP (96%)

Comments: This overwhelmingly positive vote and lack of comments may have been due to this being the first essay they read this semester. Student comments included:

-I really enjoyed how the author discusses the flawed system of objective grading. It put into words a lot of concepts I had already thought about but didn't know how to articulate.

-I think this article will help international students ease the anxiousness of writing paper by using English.

-Very good text that relates to the content of the course. Applies to all students.

-I think this helps the student put their own situation into the scenario and how they could possibly learn and improve.

- I think this reading provides valuable information about we should talk/communicate with others, especially in writing. It gives us tools to use when thinking about how to write to different audiences.

-I liked this reading because it makes students more open-minded and culturally aware on writing differences among the population.

-Pattanayak's writing enhanced my perspective and led me to reflect on my past and current experiences in English education. It encourages everyone to have pride in their voice by not creating a mold in which we all must fit would be beneficial to our communities. This reading was compelling, and I appreciated the education it provided.

-I enjoyed this reading, and I was able to relate it back to previous essays I have read in high school. The reading highlights key basic aspects of what a classroom setting may expect, and how to turn academic writing into real writing.

Only one student posted a negative comment about the writer using more history and facts than they felt was necessary, rather than “helping how to write or becoming a rhetorical citizen.” As the instructor of the course, I appreciated the commenter’s use of a concept we had just begun to discuss in the course, despite not seeing a link to this in the reading.

Essay title: "Grading Has Always Made Writing Better" by Mitchell R. James (*Bad Ideas About Writing*)

Vote result: KEEP (86%)

Comments: Some students expressed how they saw a connection between this essay and the course grading agreement (which was based on a labor-based grading contract credited to Asao Inoue, 2015). Student comments included:

- This article did a wonderful job of explaining why the way teachers and schools grade, today, is problematic. Once teachers fill a classroom with language that encourages only perfection, students shut down. Other than grammar there is no specific way one should grade writing. It is completely objective. It is the teachers job to go into every writing assignment with an open mind. I really enjoyed this reading as well.

-I personally think that this is the best article I've read this semester. It actually gave me more confidence for stepping out of my comfort zone.

-Perfectly explains the logic of the new grading system that is introduced in the pilot class. The problems with the old grading system that are addressed are relatable.

-This a great article because its like how our class was structured. I think it makes us all responsible for our actions

-I think this reading is valuable to this class since the grading isn't like the traditional system

-For being such a short read, I enjoyed the message that James was trying to convey to the readers. Tackling the flaws within our education system today isn't an easy feat to do or to talk about so I deeply appreciated his sentiments on the issue. Knowing what I know now, it gives me a better understanding of what's it like being on the other side of the fence where I'm able to put myself in his shoes for once and have to be the one to give out the grades instead of working on one.

-I like how this article went into detail about the current grading system and its flaws, while also offering suggestions on how to improve it. Many students are more focused on their grades rather than the actual assignment, which is an aspect that was also brought up in the article.

-This piece of writing was interesting to me. I have not thought deeply about this subject. The alternative ways of assessment can allow students to feel comfortable with making errors and in turn, encourage the desire to learn.

Some students did not see the connection to the class or the grading agreement:

-I believe that this is interesting but not beneficial for how we can develop as writers. It may open our eyes to different opinions and perspectives, but it doesn't necessarily help us grow and develop.

-It's a good topic to have a conversation about, but it didn't feel like it was too relative to the writing assignments.

Students were also not in agreement around the length and clarity, while most found the article concise, approachable or "easy to read," other students expressed it was long and "hard to

understand.” These differing viewpoints may speak to the students’ varying experiences with texts. For some, their educational experiences to this point may have required them to engage longer, complex or theoretical texts, while others may have been familiar with essays that were shorter in length or more narrative in structure. This difference could be an area for further exploration in a different project.

Essay title: "Writing Knowledge Transfers Easily" by Ellen C. Carillo (*Bad Ideas About Writing*)

Vote result: KEEP (75%)

Comments: While not all of the students saw the value of keeping this article in the mix, the comments indicated the students developing an understanding of concept of “transfer,” which was essential in connecting the work done in this course to the discipline of their major fields of study. Student who made the connection stated:

- Very great look about how writing skills and knowledge are not easily transferable over time and how it makes it hard to take a course that is meant to build off something you were taught a long time ago or were taught differently.

-It is very ignorant of teachers to just assume that knowledge universally transfers over. This article did a wonderful job of discussing this. Writing instruction can be taught objectively from teacher to teacher and the materials of the course greatly vary yet, we are forced to advance in placement regardless of our level or confidence in the material.

-If every professor expects students to be equipped with every knowledge that they learned in the past, then this kind of cognition will make student’s burden even heavier and will also degrade the student’s learning process. The uncertainty of this learning process will only confuse students to take the next step.

-Debunks the concept that writing skills in one class can be easily and seamlessly applied to another.

- This reading is related to the first assignment of genre and how there are no definite way of writing style. Each genre has it's own different writing style.

-What I’ve learned from this article is Carrillo’s idea of metacognition, which she says just “thinking about thinking” could be a helpful process to help students in transferring their skills to a higher degree instead of writing an academic paper just for a grade.

-This asked students to think or reflect on the material rather than just completing assignments. It could be beneficial to how we move forward in writing. The curriculum needs to change for students to transfer skills and tactics they have previously learned into future endeavors. I enjoyed this reading and learned a lot from it.

As the instructor, I greatly appreciated how students began to take ownership of the texts and concepts that were key to the class as expressed in their reflections. The concepts of transfer, genre, and metacognition are inherent in the learning outcomes for this course. Seeing students use the terms and express ideas that spoke to their past experiences and future success felt like a win, especially so early in the semester. (I particularly liked the call for curriculum change—exactly what we were in the process of creating.)

In contrast, students who were less enamored with this article added:

-This article was insightful, but it wasn't an article that I was thinking deeply about while reading and after like I was with some of the other articles.

-What she talks about is pretty obvious already

- Too unclear, a bit easy to get lost in her arguments.

Again, these spoke to personal preference or potentially past experience—both of which were helpful in determining whether to include this piece in future courses.

Essay title: "Identity, Authority, and Learning to write in New Workplaces" by Elizabeth Wardle (*Writing About Writing*)

Vote result: KEEP (78%)

Comments: This vote result was surprising as this essay generated strong reactions expressed in the class discussions in both classes. Some survey comments demonstrated these sentiments, with students calling the essay “long,” “dry,” “disorganized” and expressed they found themselves skimming. However others students saw this essay as transferrable to a work environment or working with diverse groups in their disciplines.

One student stated: *This essay was the most memorable to me, because I really resonated with what the author had to say. I think it shows examples of how to navigate writing through your different jobs or stages of life, which is important to understand.*

While another student stated: *Hated this soooooooo muuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuch and I hope you never use it again in the future forever and ever and if I ever meet her I'll tell her so to her face!*

This wide, and somewhat extreme, range of opinions made me question the value of using this piece in future sections of this class. The link of identity and workplace was directly reflective of the goals of the course in terms of connecting the class content and projects to their majors and future careers; however, the in-class discussion (in both class sections) devolved away from these concepts of identity and transfer and into challenging Wardle as a writer and the article as a useful piece of writing. While this led to a fruitful discussion, including the topics of privilege and sexism, it was somewhat off topic of the intended goal of the class meeting.

Essay title: "Tracing Process-how texts come into being" by Paul Prior (*Writing About Writing*)

Vote result: LOSE (68%)

Comments: This essay also generated strong responses, as indicated by the vote. My original plan included using this essay for a reverse outlining exercise, but fortunately I thought better of it last minute. Students found the essay “unnecessarily” lengthy, hard to follow, confusing, “harder to comprehend and analyze,” and not doing “much to hold the reader's attention.” Student comments included:

-This was one of the readings that was harder to comprehend and analyze.

-It talks too much about history and for a writing class to help students to write for their appropriate major, I think it doesn't fit in.

-I think it was a little too boring and feel like it isn't necessarily important for me to learn or know about.

Not all the comments were negative, one student expressed: *I liked how this article used many examples to back up the claims that were made. I enjoy any article that offers suggestions on how to write more effectively and efficiently since writing is something that people do on a daily basis throughout their life.*

Another student even stated: *I did find some of the reading to be informative, but unnecessarily lengthy. Because of this, there were times where I felt overwhelmed by this article a bit and had to reread it to get a better understanding of what the author was trying to convey.* This comment

shows the student revisited and worked their way through the text, finding parts of it informative, albeit overwhelming at first glance. The rich conversation, both in class and in their reflections, made me wonder whether this is exactly the type of text we want to include. If we are preparing them for adapting the skills used in this class to other courses in their majors or even their future career, should we *want* them to grapple with some of the texts?

Another student commented: *This reading assignment was very long and excruciatingly difficult to comprehend, not because of language use, but the specificity in the focus of the text. Although there was some good insight, I found most parts of it too technical. However, I can see how the focus of this article is relevant to our current topic of genre analysis. By being able to understand the process of writing in particular pieces of writing, we can provide improved in-depth information about the conventions as well as the entirety of the piece and how it may fit into its genre.* Although not particularly a fan of the piece, this student ultimately saw a link to the current assignment (even as clarity around that assignment was still being negotiated). This essay may not have assisted in making the assignment more clear, but the connection between ideas in the text and the goals of the assignment was apparent.

Essay title: "The Composing Processes of Unskilled College Writers" by Sondra Perl (*Writing About Writing*)

Vote result: KEEP (57.7%)

Comments: The mixed reviews here made me wonder if the students were beginning to come into their own as critics at this point in the semester, as many were borrowing from their reading reflections to make their critiques. They appeared decidedly more picky about readings they didn't like.

Some saw themselves in this essay: *As someone who came from community college and felt pretty thrown around when it came to the required writing courses I was expected to take, this article resonated with me. It was rather empowering to read that she chose to conduct this specific study because schools treat all students with a certain set of expectations that doesn't cater to all students equally. She chose to focus her studies on the students who are often left behind in school to elaborate on where there needs to be more focus and attention for these types of students*

Others found the article hard to comprehend: *Although it was interesting I found this article to be very hard to understand. The information collected from the study was dense and difficult to digest. This is unfortunate because it was probably very beneficial information.*

Another student, who expressed they did not enjoy this essay at all despite seeing some similarities between themselves and the study participants, stated: *I do commend Perl's study or experiment and recognize that I find myself sharing the same attributes and deficiencies as an unskilled writer does. But the real question is who's to say what constitutes good or "unskilled" writing at all? I believe that some people express their thoughts in different ways and some use writing as their strong suit and others can find different ways of expressing their writing on a different platform.*

Another noted that: *It was too much statistics and the study didn't seem to impactful for this class.* And another student added there were other more relatable readings, such as "Shitty first drafts."

This lack of relatability seemed to be most important to consider in the future use decision. If students do not see themselves in the piece, does the piece lose its impact? Did I want them to see themselves as “unskilled” writers? Does this serve them at this stage of their writing development? These questions reflect how not all of the pieces in this study of writing text may be geared for this audience. They also had me questioning the purpose of the readings—whether I am aiming to build student confidence or provide a reality check or simply present ideas or theories for their consideration. If the goal for the class was transferrable skills, then seeing themselves as “unskilled” may counter that effort. I wanted them to recognize and own the funds of knowledge (Moll et al, 1992) they carried with them, not see themselves as lacking or deficient. We were all meant to be learning and developing as the semester progressed.

Essay title: "Rigid Rules, Inflexible Plans, and the Stifling Language" by Mike Rose (*Writing About Writing*)

Vote results: KEEP (57.7%)

Comments: This was another tightly contested article. From the instructor’s perspective, using Rose was a no-brainer. Rose struggled himself as a student at UCLA and spoke as an educator with this history. While some of the pilot students related to the students within Rose’s study, others found the study or article as a whole to be “boring” or “forgettable.” However, there were not the glaring negative comments found in response to Perl’s piece above.

Some students found Rose’s article “not applicable to this course,” while others found differently. One student stated: *Overall, this article is very useful to approaching future writing assignments, as it promotes a process of writing that is nonconforming to the rules outlined and given in many writing classes in school and applied rigidly by students.* Another noted: *Love him but not necessarily this.* This is the sentiment that I take moving forward. With other pieces to choose from by the same author, I may choose to find a piece that more directly links to the projects or purpose in this course.

Essay title: "Shitty First Drafts" by Anne Lamott (*Writing About Writing*)

Vote result: KEEP (89%)

Comments: Overall, students found this article relatable, easy to follow, and humorous. Student comments were predominantly positive:

-Reading the article “Shitty First Draft” somehow comforted me.

-This article was very helpful it acknowledges how it is ok to have a shitty first draft. This is important because students put a lot of pressure on their first draft. This can limit their ability within the writing process to be creative.

-It was funny, relatable, and a reminder that first drafts do not need to be perfect which is a vital tool to have.

-My favorite reading!! Lets the students know not to be so hard on themselves.

One student noted: *The humor that Lamott added in the article was well needed since our previous reads from different authors have been pretty dry so this was refreshing.* Another simply said: *Helped.*

Oddly, the negative comments were pretty much missing in action (the 11% didn’t choose to voice why they would jettison this reading). This spoke highly of this piece for future use.

Essay Title: "Students Should Learn About The Logical Fallacies" by Daniel V. Bommarito (*Bad Ideas About Writing*)

Vote result: KEEP (74%)

Comments: Some saw the link between this essay and their current project (an assignment exploring a controversy in their field). Students who found value in the article made comments such as:

- Makes students aware about logical fallacies that many did not know about.*
- It is important for us to know better about logical fallacies. When we are able to realize the fallacies, we can avoid being distracted by some unrelated points in the arguments and we will also become more objective and rational to view the controversial topics in our society.*
- Looking at fallacies differently rather than devalue them was an excellent way to conclude this writing. It shows readers ways to improve their writing which I appreciate.*

Students who didn't find the article valuable made comments such as: *Wish the author would have gone more in depth on how one can strategically create a logical fallacy within a debate or conversation.* Other students found the author confusing, didn't feel the article stuck with them or said to get rid of it, with no specific reason attached. The debate around logical fallacies is one that I find essentially in the process of learning to research and discern credible source information. Whether this article best serves that purpose remains up for consideration.

Research Choice Readings

For the students' tenth and final required reading from the OER texts, they were asked to pick from one of three in *Bad Ideas About Writing* that focused on research. Students were asked to vote and comment only on the essay they read, but some students voted and/or commented on readings they had not read. As a result, the statistics below may not be as accurate.

Essay title: "Research Starts With Answers" by Alison C. Witte

Vote result: KEEP (68%)(19 responses—possibly only 14 were from actual readers. Four students stated they didn't read it, and one couldn't remember, so likely didn't read it.)

Comments: The majority of comments swung toward positive for this article. Student expressed:

- It was very informative about the different types of research and reminds us that research paper is an important writing media to inform others.*
- Gives students advice to create content instead of using someone else's.*
- This article can be applied to all of my classes.*
- Answered a lot of my questions about what research questions are.*
- I think this essay, as well as the two to follow, are important to keep in the curriculum because it explains why the traditional way students were taught to write may be holding students back, and how to acknowledge that a formulaic essay isn't always what is necessary. It teaches you to conduct a proper research essay and how to align what you have written to what is being asked of you.*

Essay title: "The Traditional Research Paper Is Best" by Alexandria Lockett

Vote result: KEEP (53%)(17 responses—6 didn't read)

Comments: The rating was much tighter on this one. Student comments included:

- Topic not exciting, but easy to read and understand;*

- Assures students that just because there's an abundance of online sources, it may make writing essays harder because of so much to choose from as well as the chance of plagiarism and not credible sources;
- Gave more insight on how the traditional essay paper has been evolving but the author thinks that a traditional paper is best due to uniformity;
- I found these essays intriguing because I have been trying to break away from the structured essays I was originally taught to write
- Could be replaced with something more effective

Essay title: "Research Starts With A Thesis Statement" by Emily A. Wierszewski

Vote result: KEEP (83%) (18 responses—4 didn't read)

Comments: Students seemed a little confused about the author's message around the importance of a thesis statement versus advice not to focus on the thesis statement. Student insights included:

- Excellent read, author talked about how to not focus on the thesis statement when typing an essay;
- Thesis statement is important, so it's need to be stressed because it an easy leeway to continue writing;
- I find it important to teach students other methods of writing essays.

Not all of the students saw this essay as relevant to class, despite being in the middle of doing research for a project—possibly because a “traditional” thesis was not part of the project for all. (They were allowed to choose the medium for relaying their message effectively to their audience and making their claim or main point reflected their choice.)

Overall, the choice of which article to read provided the opportunity to jigsaw the conversation, with students sharing their insights with others who read the same article first, then sharing their takeaways in groups with people who read the other articles. Having a selection of readings and ideas to share worked well for class discussion and supporting their research projects-in-progress.

Total “Keep/Lose” Votes

Based on the survey results, the final tally of Keep vs. Lose for each textbook was closer than expected considering some of the conversations and comments made on the individual essays. One student in the transfer class announced in class that we should keep all of the articles in *Bad Ideas* and lose all of the articles in *Writing about Writing*. The rest of the students did not necessarily agree.

The tally (with number of “close” votes—votes within 50% range for KEEP):

- Bad Ideas About Writing* (7 Essays—KEEP: 7; LOSE: 0)(1 close vote)
- Writing About Writing* (5 Essays—KEEP: 4; LOSE:1)(2 close votes)

This tally indicates that both books provided value of some sort for the students in these classes, making the choice of whether to continue using each something to consider.

Findings

The choice to use OER textbooks for both sections of this pilot course proved to have unexpected benefits. Not only did the students appreciate not having to pay for textbooks, but they also took ownership in the process of assessing the suitability of each texts for future use in the course. As the semester progressed and their confidence in critiquing or sharing their insights increased, and

the reading reflections and in-class conversations around the texts became more involved and engaging. Even the texts that were not-so-well-received generated discussions that reflected awareness of key concepts and/or rhetorical choices in the articles. This was not consistent for all articles or all students, but overall, there was opportunity to link the readings to the work and goals of the pilot course.

Going into the survey stage of the pilot, I would have guessed that the students would overwhelmingly recommend every essay in *Bad Ideas About Writing*, while rejecting nearly every essay they encountered from *Writing About Writing* (the exception being “Shitty First Drafts,” which was universally praised—with most students making positive comments about the essay in their reflections and class discussions). However, after reading the votes and the survey comments, the decision of which essays to keep and which to lose is not so clear. Even the idea of keeping only those articles that were popular is a choice to question, as some essays, such as those by Wardle, Perl, and Prior, were challenging in ways that this course, as the last in a sequence meant to fulfill a core requirement, should be. The pieces generated interesting conversations around *why* the students didn’t enjoy reading them, which spoke deeply to the rhetorical choices of the authors and connection with their audience (the students).

In retrospect, the choice to use *Writing About Writing* with an undergraduate class was risky. After the semester began, I engaged in discussions with other educators, both at USF and via a listserv for Writing Program Administrators, and discovered that, in some circles, this text was recommended for use at the Masters level of study. The students were frequently vocal in their praise of *Bad Ideas* as a text, but I do think that keeping some pieces from *Writing About Writing* could add rigor and complexity alongside the students’ personal research for course projects.

Goals Moving Forward

As development of this upper division Rhetoric and Language course continues, the hope is to broaden the course instruction beyond the members of the New Curriculum Committee. For Spring 2020, the department invited both adjunct and full time faculty who are not currently part of the NCC to join in a second round pilot. This invitation to include a variety of faculty members in the course development is particularly important and significant as this upper division course could be assigned to a variety of adjuncts or full time faculty in the future. The department also recognizes that contingent faculty are essential to the long-term success of this curriculum.

In future sections that I may teach of this course, I may aim to engage with the texts as a class by using editable OER materials or a notation program, such as hypothes.is, to insert comments, ideas, additional examples from research, and relevant images or quotes, in order to deepen the connect between the concepts and the classwork. A primary goal of my course sections was to promote transferrable skills—ones that could be adaptable to their chosen fields of study. Highlighting which skills can transfer between contexts by using texts that are open for such use seems like a natural fit for this and other courses in the university.

Incorporating open educational resources, in particular, into our courses can increase student ownership of and engagement in text-based discussions while reducing textbook costs and providing a more equitable educational experience for students from a variety of backgrounds. My aim would be to capitalize on these practices by creating an environment in which students drive the discussion while developing their rhetorical technique and building awareness of their own rhetorical choices as well as those of the authors they read. In pursuing the goal of creating

either a textbook specifically for this new upper division course, or whether we will use an online OER reader of some sort, the findings from this project will no doubt provide important insight and impact these decisions.

References

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