

# “THE MAKING OF A GREAT IDEA”: CULTIVATING SEEDS OF CHANGE IN THE FIRST-YEAR WRITING CLASSROOM

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As First-Year Writing instructors, members of a department<sup>1</sup> dedicated to literature and writing, and faculty at a university whose identity was changing quickly, we found ourselves in a promising dilemma. Our university mission statement assured students that it would be “committed to the development of each student to become a productive and responsible citizen,” but we believed that this aspect of the mission wasn’t happening to its fullest potential. At home in our department, faculty were bemoaning the lack of a core literature requirement, which they believed would help to bolster the ethos of the department and resuscitate the liberal arts tradition, which was also a part of the University’s ethos. As FYW faculty committed to the study of social epistemic rhetoric in our own classrooms, we saw an opportunity to effect curricular change that would ignite the University’s mission, and connect students to the relevance of writing.

According to James Berlin, social epistemic rhetoric “depends on teachers knowing their students” and encourages teachers’ appreciation of students’ cultural tastes and influences—music, technology, language, fashion, literature, film—and a collective investigation into their “economic, social and cultural conditions” (113). As individual instructors, each of us worked to invite critical analysis of culture into our classrooms; indeed, we were constantly seeking ways to show students that we believed that their worlds were important, complex, and worth studying. But

social epistemic rhetoric is not just the study of culture, for, as Berlin explains, it asks students not only to rhetorically analyze their worlds, but also to “become active, critical agents of their experience rather than passive victims of cultural codes” (113). Though we hoped that rhetorical analysis might lead students toward civic engagement, we were not convinced that they were making that connection. We looked to Donald Lazere, whose work became important to this pedagogical project and who argues to his student audience,

At the first mention of the word “politics,” many students start groaning, “I’m just not interested in politics.” As a plea to persuade you not to turn off right there, let me argue that “politics” doesn’t just refer to dry matters of the branches of government, the structure of parties and electoral processes, and such. Many Americans believe their life and work are wholly personal matters and under their own control, and thus they can ignore what happens in the public sphere; to the extent they are aware of larger national or international forces, they believe that those forces are beyond their understanding or control, hence not worth thinking about. You may not think you are interested in politics; however, politics is interested in *you*. (4)

While Lazere’s goal toward civic literacy is geared toward “second-term” or “advanced composition” students (1), we were inspired by his words and saw great potential to spark interest in civic literacy and engagement in students’ first semester of FYW. Thinking about our department’s goal to show students the significance of literature, we also saw an opportunity to connect students to classic texts that revealed the rhetorical strategies of past and present philosophers, politicians, and artists who had used writing to change the world.

In our course, titled “The Making of a Great Idea,”<sup>2</sup> students’ civic engagement required their written entry into an area of society that they believed needed to be changed, whether that

change was deemed ‘small’ or ‘large’ by the classroom or community. We used readings and assignments that scaffolded students’ learning to culminate in a semester-end project requiring students to “pitch” their great ideas to their appropriate community audiences. We did not prescribe the directions toward social change that students were required to take; rather, “social change” was a concept defined by each individual student. The level of “importance” or “urgency” of a student’s proposed change on a global or local scale was not emphasized as much as a student’s efforts to become rhetorically aware of the situations into and about which she was writing her proposal. This course aimed to foster students’ engagement with texts that were at times challenging, to encourage them to become observers of what constitutes a “great idea” and how it is sustained over time, and to help them understand the rhetorical and social efficacy of their civic knowledge and their writing beyond the boundaries of the classroom.

### **Our Institution**

We are a small, private, liberal arts university, with approximately 5,600 undergraduate and graduate students.<sup>3</sup> Over half of our students (whose entering GPAs average 3.3) are in-state residents, but the school’s profile boasts national and international representation from all over the U.S. and about 100 countries. According to its mission statement, our university promises to attend to students’ cultural knowledge, and the goals of the academic core of the University connect directly to those of the FYW Program. These goals ask for student learning to include effective communication across various media, an ability to rationalize through complex scenarios, an awareness of how issues connect across disciplines and across local and global communities, and an ability to articulate and defend personal morals and to understand others’ perspectives. The language of both the University academic core and the FYW Program mission statement suggests a University-wide ideology of composition and rhetoric that supports collaboration among students and a

seminar-style approach to the course that builds a classroom community.

University students are required to fulfill two semesters of FYW. The majority of students take two semesters of FYW, but some fulfill the first-semester course credit through other means. Placement into FYW is determined by SAT scores, with exemption and/or credit awarded for Advanced Placement Language/Composition or Literature/Composition test scores of three or higher. The first course in the two-course sequence of FYW at our institution aims to instill in students a knowledge of the fundamentals of composition and rhetoric, a sense of writer identity, and an awareness that the writing skills that they cultivate in the classroom are relevant and have the potential to impact their local and global worlds. The course catalog description of the course is vague, but it is meant to be conducive to individual instructors' creation of thematic coursework or special topics in order to achieve the course objectives.<sup>4</sup> Building on this first-semester's goals, the second-semester course is geared toward research-based exploration and writing. FYW instruction is made up of full-time tenured and tenure-track faculty, term-appointed faculty and adjunct faculty representing different areas of study in English (i.e. various areas of Literary Studies, Creative Writing, Journalism, and Composition and Rhetoric).

We have both taught the first- and second-semester courses (as well as the University's basic writing course), and our assessment of the University's first-year students is that most come to college with a deeply-seeded resistance to writing, as well as a distant relationship to reading texts of any significant length or complexity. What strikes us most about these students, however, is that many linger in a B-average middle space of getting by with a minimal amount of effort. However, when challenged with more rigorous reading and writing tasks, and when told that they *are capable* of taking on such tasks, students have often proven more than willing to try and have often surprised themselves with their successes (e.g., critical thinking breakthroughs, taking on writing risks, working harder on revision than they have in previous

years). It was this common perception that we had of our students that helped to inspire us to construct this course, “The Making of a Great Idea.”

### **Re-imagining First-Year Writing’s First Semester**

As one way to answer the University’s mission statement’s call for civic engagement, first-semester FYW courses at our institution are linked with a course that teaches global issues and current events. Taught by its own core of faculty and by faculty across the disciplines, this linked course aims to help students cultivate cultural awareness through course texts, applied learning and collaborative projects. Ideally, FYW instructors will collaborate with their linked instructors of these global issues/current events courses in order to synthesize the goals of the two courses so that students get a holistic experience that attends to their growth in writing and research as well as their education in civic literacy and responsibility. When the pairing works, it can be a successful experience for the students and faculty involved. Several faculty in the department remember successful experiences with working collaboratively with these linked courses. For example, we—the authors—worked well together in Spring 2007 to create a learning community focusing on place pedagogy, spatial inclusion/exclusion, and global disability studies.

However, meeting to collaborate is often difficult to coordinate for a variety of reasons, one of which is that so many of the instructors of FYW and these global issues/current events courses are itinerant adjunct faculty who do not have access to any office space at the University. Furthermore, the 3-3 workload (twelve credit hours per semester) of faculty—often more for adjunct and term-appointed faculty—takes some of the needed time and inspiration out of doing the additional work to collaborate when faculty are trying to manage their own course preparation, grading, service, and scholarship. Doing the work to link courses—for no additional compensation (time or pay)—can take a back seat to the ease of simply teaching the courses

separately with no curricular link. Of course, just by virtue of being in two of the same classes, students who are in linked courses do indeed form a community that is often productive and supportive, providing a smoother transition into academia. For example, early in the semester, students collaborate to represent a country in a program-wide simulation, which requires them to negotiate common goals pertaining to local and global issues. In some cases, this exercise in collaborative research and experience is also reinforced in the linked FYW course. However, in terms of achieving the goals of applied learning, which for these linked courses philosophically can mean writing and researching to explore diverse perspectives and cultivate civic literacy, the intended synthesis is lost on those students whose instructors haven't worked collaboratively to compose their syllabi.

Another critical factor of the institutional context is the lack of a literature requirement in the core curriculum. Students are required to take eleven credits in the Humanities or Fine Arts, none of which *has* to be in literature. Many English Studies faculty at our institution view this lack of a literature requirement as an erosion of the liberal arts experience at the University, as well as a perpetuation of students' lack of exposure to renowned texts, let alone to canonical texts. It is perhaps because of this situation that many FYW sections reflect a larger emphasis on traditional literary texts and literary analysis rather than on texts and analyses that a course in composition and rhetoric might suggest (e.g., classical rhetoric, rhetorical analysis of multiple genres of scholarly and popular writing, writing studies theory, contextualized rhetorical grammar, rhetorical analysis of images in popular culture).

With our attention on the present and future theory of Composition and Rhetoric (which we discuss in more depth below), those of us who are tenure-track faculty with specialization in Composition and Rhetoric perceived an opportunity and a need to design and implement a first-semester FYW syllabus that would merge the educational mission of the institution, the goals of the academic core, and the goals of the

FYW/global issues/current events linkage, while maintaining the departmental goals for the course. We sought to create a course that would

- expose students to a variety of philosophical, social and political arguments embedded in classic texts from B.C.E. to today,
- invite students to start from the personal and work their way critically into the social by finding ways to connect their own and others' experiences to those of the past,
- help students to recognize the sustainability of literature over the centuries by identifying its arguments embedded in popular culture of today, and
- foster students' pursuit of their own causes in the construction of proposals that might make immediate change in their worlds and help them to understand change as a process that happens over time with revision.<sup>5</sup>

In the design of “The Making of a Great Idea,” we wanted to further contextualize a FYW course that would attend to the relevance of writing not only in students' college and professional careers, but also in their roles as citizens. In other words, we wanted students to continue to ask, how will composition and rhetoric apply to my work as a student and as a professional? But we also wanted them to ask, how will writing and rhetorical awareness inform the roles I play in my communities? The description for our version of the course “The Making of a Great Idea” explains how we used the course content to offer students a curriculum that integrated principles of composition and rhetoric while also exposing them to classical examples of these principles that they would then apply to their exploration of how social change gets made:

Over the term, we will explore how composition and rhetoric have been necessarily entwined in our cultures for

hundreds of years. In this course we will read many of the great ideas that have made enormous impacts on the ways in which we understand or perceive the world—from Aristotle to Douglass, from Plato to MLK. We will analyze those ideas in discussion and in writing in order to understand what gave them such rhetorical success that we continue to build on them today.<sup>6</sup>

We asked students to critically explore the making of “great ideas” in the past and present, while simultaneously asking them to expand their critical, analytical and rhetorical skills. Our hope was that students would begin to consider themselves as critical readers and writers of rhetorical strategies that could, indeed, be the “power tools” they would use to express their views in their society.

### **Exploring the Beginnings of Change: Cultivating a Route Toward Civic Engagement**

Those of us who designed this course value community-based service on personal levels. We actively participate in different discourse communities, spending a great deal of time outside of academia working on various service projects (e.g., adult literacy, a street newspaper publication, working in the deaf community). However, service-learning in its traditional form can face generational challenges. As we teach students from “Generation Me,” we struggle with their engagement with coursework, let alone service-learning components. Psychologist Jean M. Twenge explores the generation of our students in her book *Generation Me: Why Today’s Young Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled—and More Miserable Than Ever Before*. From years of research data, she argues that GenMe is self-centered and depressed. According to research collected by Twenge and four of her colleagues,

Narcissism is especially acute among students born after 1982, the cohort most likely to use “self-focused” Web sites like MySpace and YouTube. Whatever the cause, the

researchers argue that increased narcissism can have pernicious effects, on the individual and society. They cite previous studies showing narcissists have trouble forming meaningful relationships, tend to be materialistic, and are prone to higher levels of infidelity, substance abuse, and violence. (30)

Traditional service-learning can be quite challenging for many in this generation and often leads to a false sense of charity and apathetic volunteerism, as well as “service for a grade.” At our university, we are teaching a population whose members are often disconnected from individuals within the communities in which they live. Furthermore, just under half of the student population is from areas outside of the state. This particular characteristic of the student population has the potential to make investment into service false and more charity-based than social-justice-based. To ask students to leave the safety or ‘the known’ of the classroom and engage in a community that they will not have a relationship with past the end of the semester often sets up a shallow experience and creates scenarios of students going through the motions to satisfy the requirements of the class.

The physical and intellectual constraints of the classroom are also partially to blame for limiting the relevance of civic engagement in FYW. Students still interpret the classroom as the property of the University to which they are visitors. Nedra Reynolds’s argument about the “temporary” and constrained nature of the classroom is helpful to this discussion as she asks teacher-scholars to consider, “one of the problems with university teaching is that classrooms are not easily inhabited. [. . .] In a composition classroom, the inhabitants are temporary—only for three hours a week, in and out—and often required to be there to fulfill the university/universal requirement to pass first-year composition” (157-158). Contributing to this transience is the short time that teachers and students have to connect to common goals. For those courses that try to implement a cultural studies approach to composition, argues Richard Fulkerson, the agenda of

the teacher is still problematic today. He claims, “students read texts judged important by the teacher. They write about those texts, and their work is evaluated based on how well it shows they understand and can perform the interpretive approach” (662-663). Joe Hardin’s warnings about the politically charged classroom are as critical now as they were in 2001: “If rhetoric and rhetorical instruction must always be ideologically motivated, then it becomes necessary for scholars and teachers of composition to examine the material, political and ethical possibilities and motivations of their own pedagogical methods and of the discourse conventions they promote” (210). Hardin calls upon us as instructors to sensitize ourselves to our own agendas. In constructing our course, we took into consideration the temporal and political challenges of a first-semester FYW course, and we were motivated to consider what we and our students could accomplish in fifteen weeks as we invited them to define what civic literacy meant *to them*.

Knowing full well that the challenges we describe above are not just specific to our university, we make an argument with this course “The Making of a Great Idea” for a different route toward civic engagement, a route that we believe more practically addresses the needs of our students and the potential for future FYW courses at our university and at institutions that may face similar generational and institutional restraints. Our endeavor builds on the curricular wave in English Studies toward the cultivation of civic literacy and civic engagement among teachers and students. The Conference on English Education Leadership and Policy Summit’s 2005 beliefs statement, “What is English Education?” calls upon K-16 educators in English Studies to commit to civic literacy in the classroom, “which involves working with ideas and information that students will need to be mature, productive, and responsible citizens” (CEE Executive Committee). Building on this civic literacy foundation of “working with ideas and information”—students’ educational autobiographies; rhetorical analysis of classic arguments of King, Freire, Plato, Aristotle, Douglass, Carson and many others;

analysis of artifacts from popular culture—we urged students on their own paths toward civic engagement through the composition of their own written proposals for social change. These proposals, developed over a semester of rhetorical and cultural analysis of classic and popular texts, were in many ways representations of “action and reflection—as literate acts that could yoke community action” that Peck, Flower and Higgins describe in their research on community literacy (200). While their work delved deeply into a multi-year community collaboration, we worked with the constraints of our own institution in this course to help students examine the rhetorical beginnings of social change: How are great ideas born and communicated? While most student proposals would never be read or received by their intended audiences, the simulation of students’ efforts was critically important to their understanding of the seeds of change, to our understanding of how they viewed their world, and to our future efforts to teach students about the relevance of their writing in communities outside the classroom.

In constructing this course, we drew our inspiration from many in the field who have negotiated both the global push for civic engagement among students and the constraints of institutions unwilling to adapt their FYW curricula to include what is often interpreted as “nonacademic writing,” or writing that is rhetorically situated outside of the academy. One of us is familiar with the weight that terms like “rigor” and “academic discourse” can take on when a case is made for the rhetorical study of community-based activity in the FYW classroom; not everyone perceives service-learning as a readable text.<sup>7</sup> Contrary to many skeptics’ assumptions that community-based learning is academically vacuous, however, some have suggested that it can indeed be a source of great academic rigor when balanced with traditional FYW instruction and theoretical analysis. For example, in “Building a Swan’s Nest for Instruction in Rhetoric,” Nora Bacon discusses the implementation of community-based writing assignments at San Francisco State University. In her article, she asks the question posed by many who have tried to implement

similar types of pedagogical approaches in the FYW classroom: “Could writing instruction simultaneously prepare students to write academic essays and a variety of texts required in nonacademic settings?” (592). Bacon’s observations lead her to conclude that in order for students to “develop a real (not merely abstract) understanding of rhetorical principles they need to write in more than one setting, for more than one audience and more than one purpose” (606). That is to say, for students to become aware of the specific purposes of texts for specific discourse communities, the teacher should offer students multiple ways to compare genres, both academic and nonacademic, and their purposes so that students can engage in and “profit from a movement back and forth between practice and theory” (609). In order to become effective communicators, students must gain an appreciation for the rhetorical situation they are communicating in and from as they learn to adapt to the different discourse communities they communicate in and to. By asking students to define what it means for them to be civically literate, we ask them to engage in writing assignments that are relevant to their personal lives and to the various communities they inhabit.

We certainly perceive the value of approaching the FYW class as a course in writing and rhetoric, one that not only introduces students to rhetors and rhetoricians, but also asks them to practice these roles in their reading and writing. In the case of our course, this practice is manifested in students’ writing for both academic and public audiences. In “Service Learning and Public Discourse,” Bruce Herzberg asserts, “If we wish to claim that the composition course is truly about rhetoric, about civic virtue, and about public as well as academic discourse, we must learn how to conceptualize the connections between the academy and society in ways our students, our administrators, and we ourselves find convincing” (396). Ultimately, the student needs to be convinced that language matters and needs to understand that how she presents, uses, and arranges her language has a particular effect on her audience—whether it be an audience of her college peers, or the local TV station, or a national publication. By taking their writing

public, students are asked to enter the realm of service-learning, but conceived in a much different way from a semester-long research/writing project situated in the local community.

To guide students toward the understanding that they have something to share, our course introduced them to models of great ideas that have sustained time and cultures. By providing them with models of fundamental ideas of our world, we uncovered ways in which ideas have been persuasive. These models aimed to equip students with ideologies, philosophies, theories, and ramblings that resurfaced in the music, art, politics, and language they were exposed to and suggested the importance of the construction of the idea for its intended audience. We believe that it is through this work of examining great ideas that students became more civically literate by the standards of the academy; even more, however, we believe that asking them to apply the rhetoric in the ideas they examined to the creation of their own ideas was asking them to become civically engaged—to serve and to become aware and active citizens. Through reading ideas by great thinkers of different periods and diverse backgrounds, students were encouraged to participate in the liberal arts tradition by advancing their intellectual abilities. While the readings might not have been examples of traditional, fictional literature, the literature of the course was classic in nature and topic.

Asking students to examine classically great ideas in order to motivate them to give back is not new. Herzberg has found success grounding some of his teaching in classical rhetoric, specifically in “the civic goals of classical rhetoric,” Quintilian’s five-part scheme, the art of persuasion (402). Like Herzberg, we have found success by examining classical texts with students and even using these texts in conjunction with texts from their lives. Herzberg reminds us of the realistic role we can ask students to take in this process of learning. We can’t expect too much from students within one semester, but we can equip them with the tools to use beyond the semester and even beyond the academy. We believe that inquiry into rhetorical awareness and civic

literacy begins, in part, with students' exposure to globally, philosophically, and historically critical texts. Our course asked students to read and analyze the works of philosophers and thinkers, and to ask, what are their arguments? As instructors, we have ideas about what these texts stand for, and students are used to being told how to read a text. They are familiar with the positivist pedagogy that suggests that specific meaning can be found within—and if they don't find it there, then they have read inaccurately or insufficiently. We cannot know how the shockwaves of these old, not so old, and current philosophers might resonate with these students' lives, and with the artifacts from their cultures. So we asked students in one major assignment to reflect on where they experienced these classic arguments emerging in the cultural artifacts around them — in literature, in film, in music, in television? The rhetorical analysis was in their hands: what did they think these texts were arguing? What messages were the authors sending? Who were the intended or unintended audiences of these popular texts? In what ways did the popular text reconstruct the classic argument?

Out of this inquiry students began to recognize the continuing resonance of civic engagement—those arguments that were crafted to make social change—from centuries ago, from decades ago. We read student analyses of Aristotle in 'Lil Wayne, the films *Blast From the Past* and *Mean Girls* and the song lyrics of Kurt Cobain as evidence of the continued efficacy of Plato's "Allegory of the Cave"; *The Little Mermaid* as a defense of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's teachings about the education of children; and *Freedom Fighters* and *The Pursuit of Happyness* as proof that Douglass's words still live in our culture today; Tupac Shakur's lyrics as the continuation of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s, arguments; evidence of Freud's id, ego, and superego in Ron, Harry, and Hermione of the *Harry Potter* series; Freire's "banking concept of education" challenged in *Dead Poets Society*. Students grew in their intellectual and civic abilities by first interacting with the texts, grappling with the concepts they purported, and then articulating their own ideas for change.

Students also read the novel *The Kite Runner*—the selected common reading for all first-semester FYW courses—and in our course we structured another major writing assignment that asked them to think critically about how Hosseini’s cultural context may have shaped his rhetoric. We asked them how they thought Hosseini was trying to persuade his reader to understand or believe differently with this text, and what cultural or political problem he was trying to solve. How was Hosseini trying to affect change in his world? Who was his audience? How could they tell? How did his audience(s) react to his text? We later invited students to consider these elements of their own rhetoric when we asked them to become engaged with their own communities in the culminating proposal project, “The Making of a Great Idea.” It is not enough to understand how a text tried to change its own world, for civic literacy insists on students taking what they’ve learned and writing their way into change.

### **“What is Humanly Possible”: Successes, Challenges and Reconsiderations**

How do we move students to be civically engaged? It’s one thing to be able to identify the rhetorical and ideological construction of *The Matrix*; it’s another to show students the changes *we* think they should make in the world; and it’s yet another to help students to use their insights to make the changes *they* want to occur in their lives. Seventeen years ago Diana George and Diana Shoos warned teachers of writing that, “asking students to become critical readers of their culture does not mean demanding that they reject that culture” (201). We know that others have similarly warned us. How, then, could we send the message to students that the classroom was not entirely ours—a message that we, too, could believe in? And, how could we get students to take what they learned and apply it outside the classroom?

As we explain above, we created assignments that invited students to build on the skills used in the previous assignments and

asked them to use in some way the great ideas we were reading and discussing. Ideally, students moved from general analysis to more specific forms of rhetorical analysis to positioning themselves as rhetors. Because the assignments were scaffolded, students would examine skills in other writers, texts, or experiences that they would then choose when and how to apply for their own purposes. For one of us, students started with analyzing the role of virtue in rhetoric by using Aristotle, Plato, Quintilian, Cicero, and the film *Thank You for Smoking*. Students then moved on to an assignment that asked them to analyze where in their lives they experienced a great idea we studied. Their third assignment asked them to do a critical contextual analysis of *The Kite Runner*. For the other of us, students began with analysis of the rhetorical strategies of Aristotle, Douglass, Plato and Rousseau as they reflected on their own educational histories. Their first assignment asked them to select a specific learning context in their lives (school, sports, religious education, their parents' teaching) and analyze how it impacted their understanding of the world today. The second assignment added Cicero, Rachel Carson, and MLK to their repertoire of writers and, similar to the co-author's second assignment, asked them to analyze how a classic argument emerged in a popular text. The third project asked students to make an argument for how the rhetorical strategies Hosseini uses in *The Kite Runner* help to communicate his message.

For both of us, the capitulating assignment of the semester—"The Making of a Great Idea"—invited students to take what they had learned in and outside the class and construct multimodal proposals for great ideas that might immediately impact their worlds. We are inspired here to refer to Cheryl Glenn's challenge in her opening address at the 2008 CCCC, where she urged all of us as teachers and scholars in Composition and Rhetoric to ask ourselves and our students what is "humanly possible" in our teaching and learning. She reminded instructors of composition that we must be consciously aware that teaching is about "our movement between worlds," our ability to appreciate and navigate the many corners of our communities. Inspired by the creativity

and restraint that constructs “possibility,” and by this need for movement between classroom and community, we asked ourselves, how could we make room for students to define social change for themselves? With class discussions grounded in rhetorical analysis, we were able to move students from external texts, to their own internal texts—that is, the ideas that were brewing inside them. What did students have to show from their rhetorical analysis of the arguments around them, their recognition that the dominant cultural standards are constructions of persuasion? How could they take that learning beyond the analysis of a text that was not their own and into the construction of their own ideas? How could those ideas be rhetorically composed to make arguments for change as they engaged their own “movement between worlds”? These were the questions this final assignment asked them to tackle. And, it is through this questioning that students continued their dialectical process and generation of their ideas.

The proposal assignment incorporated both constraint and creativity. Proposals had to be directed to their appropriate audiences, to be rhetorically savvy, and to do the work they promised to do. We told students that their proposals should be so geared toward their intended audiences that we could have given them back to them in an envelope that they could address and send directly to those audiences. If students believed that multimedia components (audio or video, for example) would help their arguments, they were encouraged to integrate them. Ours was not a class on graphic design or on the use of digital technologies—though we are both inspired to do that teaching in our courses. The invitation was merely to use technologies of myriad types, to draw from the great ideas found in the texts students know, and to offer insight into civic change. Other than the maximum length of five pages and the use of MLA style for external sources, the rhetorical decisions were almost entirely up to the students.

Witnessing a range of audiences students intended to reach—be they those of political leaders, media marketers, school boards,

or sports policy makers—we were impressed to find in almost every proposal an attention to answering what the students believed to be critical social weaknesses resulting in lack of diversity, injustice, eco-ignorance, classist attitudes, sexism and homophobia in different social contexts. Many of the students seemed to understand that this was their world, and this was how they wanted to and could change it. Through this course and this final assignment, these “GenMe” students delved into their self-interests and offered change whose benefits extended beyond the self; thus, we witnessed multiple “acts” of civic engagement. One proposal drew on the work of Rachel Carson to make an argument to a Massachusetts town hall for a community-wide recycling program. Another incorporated multimedia (web audio and video) in a proposal to a Boston queer organization in which the student made an argument against the hedonism of the queer pride parade in Boston and for the bolstering of the queer community’s ethos through the construction of a more “professional” identity. Another student designed her own editorial cartoon, for which she offered a rhetorical critique of the local beach permit laws in New Jersey; prepared to submit it to her local paper, she explained in her proposal why the cartoon should impact its intended audience. Another student composed a proposal for an article to *ESPN*, in which he made an argument for a salary cap in baseball. Another student presented her proposal to the class and composed a video collage, set to music, of scenes from her native Dominican Republic, during which she offered a persuasive talk on the neglect of impoverished communities there. Another student proposed free fitness classes to be offered on campus during finals week to help relieve students’ stress—she began working for the fitness center because of her research writing this proposal.

Despite such exciting products, the processes of invention and organization presented many challenges to students, and their struggles are important for us to consider. Specifically, they expressed their frustration in one-on-one conferences and in their draft reflections with trying to articulate the first step toward

realizing their ideas, with isolating appropriate audiences for their proposals, and with organizing their support for their ideas for those audiences in appropriate forms (letter, presentation, query for an article). Most students reacted to the assignment with confusion because we had asked them to write essays all semester and now we were inviting them to step outside of standard academic discourse in order to address public audiences directly. Even though this proposal was a simulation (they were not required to send them), for many students, the prospect of even imagining that their proposals would be read by actual people other than their teachers was daunting. The stakes became higher: the goal was not just the grade, but also the manifestation of the “great idea.” We perceived a heightened sense of vulnerability for students in this project: the question of “How do I achieve an A on this assignment?” now became, “How do I achieve an A *and* convince my intended audience that my idea is worth executing?”

While this more complex self-reflection was perhaps a step in the right direction toward rhetorical awareness and civic-consciousness, we could have better prepared students for this shift in discourse, and for this new sense of agency and responsibility in their academic work. In many ways, we were so motivated by our own desire to make this assignment student-driven, and to inspire students to define what social change meant to them, that we didn’t want to influence their invention processes with outside examples. And yet, we realize now that some models would have been helpful for them to build on and even would have helped to strengthen our course goal of demonstrating the sustainability of rhetorical strategies. Providing “real world” models of proposals (query letters, grant proposals, even examples from our own personal writing) might have anchored their understanding of the assignment, and might also have shown them that they could build on the hard work of others to make changes of their own.

Critical reflection also motivates us to think about the nature of this project as a “simulation.” While most students were inspired by great ideas, some were unable to identify appropriate audiences

and organize the support for their causes. What if we had actually required students to send out their proposals? Would this requirement have fostered even more connection to the process of becoming civically engaged? After all, we constructed this assignment with the knowledge that it would be one of many entrances into public discourse that students would undertake in their academic and professional lives. Ideally, students would leave this course and enter the second semester of FYW prepared to engage more in-depth research projects that required them to intervene in a public debate of some kind. The added authenticity of requiring students to submit their proposals to their intended audiences might have deepened their explorations, pushing them to further research similar ideas in existence and cultivate community collaboration, enter into dialogue with their intended audiences, imagine themselves and their ideas as interpreted by others, and even focus more intently on the visual components of the proposal (grammar, organization, multimedia).

One of us required students to present their proposals to the class, which enabled them to experience a live audience reacting immediately to their ideas (albeit not necessarily their intended audience). For some students, this experience was a useful dry run that justified the need for more multimedia, revisions of text, further support for the idea that they might include in their final drafts of their proposals. The other of us did not require students to present on this project (they were invited to present on any of the four), but many chose to present their final projects. In future semesters, we would both require them to present on this project for the added benefits that students experienced. Furthermore, we are considering how this project might lend to students' presentations of their proposals for wider audiences (other faculty, students outside the class, community members) in mini-conference sessions. This experience might offer students the opportunity to consider themselves as agents of change in their communities, and it would offer the University an opportunity to consider some of the compelling, civically-minded work being

done by FYW students. Such an event would also help to further support the goals of our university's academic core.

Even after acknowledging the limitations of the course we offered, we are inspired by the ways in which students showed their appreciation for having an outlet for their ideas. Many students drew on existing passion to determine their topics or became passionate about their topics and their writing. Students, more often than not, flourished in their roles as experts and advocates. In-class discussions were lively and often carried on outside of class time, peer review sessions were filled with passionate dialogue, and interviews and research conducted outside the University excited students. With an opportunity to convey messages important to them, they thoughtfully constructed texts using images, organization, and voices not called for in traditional FYW academic discourse. Many explained in their final draft reflections that the project had allowed them to understand how change could be made, and several expressed their inspiration to pursue their ideas further. The result of this nontraditional exercise ranged from students declaring or changing their majors so they could pursue an education that would more likely suit their passions to at least one student setting up an internship for the summer that would allow her to get closer to experiencing the issue at the core of her proposal.

To state it explicitly, this culminating assignment asked students to generate critical thought in a convincing way. In order to be successful, students had to synthesize their learning from the entire semester and do what those they read throughout the semester had done with their great ideas: think about who their audience would be, clearly construct what it was they wanted the audience to know, and move them to respond in a particular way. Throughout the semester, students, as rhetoricians, examined the workings and failures of texts that contain ideas that have sustained the tests of time and various cultural beliefs. As rhetoricians, students critically read texts to gain knowledge of the ideas being expressed and how they were expressed. It was this twofold knowledge that students built on in this course “The

Making of a Great Idea.” As a result, we witnessed students gaining critical awareness of how they could impact change in ways that were real and important to them. This outcome meets the desire of many service-learning courses, and has the added benefit of extending beyond the class, the academy, and, in some cases, the student. As instructors, we are reminded through the students’ responses to this assignment that they have something to teach us. Our students’ ideas and interests matter, and they can be the motivation toward inspiring them to engage in composition and rhetorical analysis that is purposeful to them and to the program it serves.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Since the composition of this article, one of the writers is now employed at a different university.

<sup>2</sup>This course originally developed from collaboration between four colleagues: ourselves and two others in the department. We met throughout the summer of 2007 to discuss common course goals and assignments. While each section we taught varied slightly in assigned texts and specifics in assignments, we shared common goals and objectives. We thank our colleagues for their initial input in the design of this curriculum and for their support to share it with others.

<sup>3</sup>Currently the student enrollment has swelled to almost 6,400, impacting some of the configurations describing the institution for which we designed and implemented our curriculum.

<sup>4</sup>New curriculum and objectives for this course will be implemented in Fall 2010. Many changes have been influenced by the work we present here.

<sup>5</sup>Because we adhered to the catalog and departmental descriptions of the course, students were enrolled according to normal standards for sections of FYW.

<sup>6</sup>We are in debt to Michael Austin and his edited collection *Reading the World: Ideas That Matter* for inspiring this course. Published by W. W. Norton in 2006, *Reading the World* is a collection of ideas by many of the world’s great thinkers. The texts, both verbal and visual, cover themes such as Human Nature; War and Peace; Wealth, Poverty, and Social Class; and Language and Rhetoric.

<sup>7</sup>Refers to one of the author’s experiences at an R-1 university, where she and others tried to implement a FYW course centered on students’ service-learning projects, in

which students would use those experiences as footholds in their rhetorical exploration of social responsibility. Though the course description proposed multiple genres of writing assignments—process-based writing, analysis, and research—the course was rejected because it was perceived as not adhering to the standards of academic discourse.

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