Pedagogy Conference paper:
"Getting Real: Using a Utopian/Dystopian Framework in the Composition Classroom"
presented at the SAMLA 88th Annual Conference

Introduction

In her 1997 discussion of Elizabeth Ervin's article "Encouraging Civic Participation among First-Year Writing Students", Mary Salibrici celebrates Ervin's promotion of civic participation in her composition students through the discussion of public issues in her composition classroom. Salibrici goes on to ask for "more discussion about the ways we might bring public concerns into the classrooms for authentic talk and debate of issues. If such issues are timely and relevant for the students themselves [and] if the students have a say on the issues to be taken up, then creating opportunities for them to speak and debate with others will broaden the concept of intellectual role models, which is another legitimate concern of Ervin's" (168). Similarly, in the introduction of her 2009 NCTE report, "Writing the the 21st Century", Kathleen Yancey writes, "This is a call to action, a call to research and articulate new composition, a call to help our students compose often, compose well, and through these composings, become the citizen writers of our country, of our world, and the writers of our future." As Amy J. Wan reminds us in her article, "In the Name of Citizenship", "Scholarship in the field of rhetoric and composition often promotes the idea that successful writing instruction plays a key role in the preparation of good citizens, situating the classroom as a space that can reinvigorate democratic and participatory citizenship." Yes, it is our primary duty to help our students become better writers. But for most of us who love and celebrate the humanities, it is our implicit duty to help our students become better people. We want them to engage with their world, with the world of the university, with the towns and communities they are living and working in, and we believe

that clear articulation of their ideas allows them to become better citizens of these communities. Wan goes on to define what we mean when we say "citizenship", but she admittedly "does not recommend specific teaching practices designed to activate citizenship". In this presentation, it is my intention to offer a case study of one such teaching practice. Specifically, this presentation will explore the developments and student reception of framing a first year composition course through the lens of Utopian and Dystopian readings and film.

Methods and Course Description

In the Spring of 2016, I taught ENGL 2000, a sophomore level composition course in Louisiana State University's first year Writing Program. Using the program's guidelines, which stressed argumentative writing, the rhetorical situation, and research, I titled the course "Utopias and Dystopias: Writing for Our Future". The idea was to use fictional dystopian and utopian worlds, and the themes presented in their respective texts, as jumping off points for the discussion of contemporary issues. Students would then have a foundation for not only discussing these issues but writing about them in the course's 4 major assignments. These 4 assignments included first, a Rhetorical Analysis of an opinion piece which proposed a solution to a contemporary issue, second, an evaluative essay critiquing a Dystopian film and analyzing the film for its themes, existing relevance, and potential impact, third, an assignment loosely based on the causal argument in which students where to imagine the downfall of civilization and present their case for why the world, as we know it, has ended, and finally, number four, a researched argument proposing a solution to whichever contemporary issue peaked their interest.

In addition to Lusford and Ruzkiewicz's *Everything's an Argument*, texts discussed in the course namely consisted of articles, short stories, and films with Utopian and Dystopian themes. These included: Mark Bittman's "Why Not Utopia?", sections of Thomas Moore's "Utopia",

Jonathan Swift's "A Modest Proposal", W.H. Auden's "The Unknown Citizen", Vonnegut's "Harrison Bergeron", Tansay Gardam and John Lyde's short film "Unwind", and various clips from *The Hunger Games* movies and the *Book of Eli*.

In-practice and TOPS funding

About one month into the course, Louisiana Governor John Bel Edwards released a statement regarding Louisiana's 940 million dollar deficit, including speculation that the Taylor Opportunity Program for Students (TOPS) could be in jeopardy for the following fiscal year. Classroom morale following this announcement reached an all-time low, as 53% of students at LSU rely on the TOPS program to pay for college tuition. Almost overnight, many of my students were faced with the reality that they might not be able to attend college next year, because of the irresponsibility of the previous state administration. In "Notes Toward a Theory of Prior Knowledge…" by Liane Robertson, Kara Taczak, and Kathleen Yancey, the writers begin with, "[…]it's a truism that students draw on prior knowledge when facing new tasks, and when that acquired knowledge doesn't fit the new situation, successful transfer is less likely to occur." Rather than viewing the Utopian and Dystopian texts we were discussing in class as irrelevant considering the state's budget crisis, my students, without prompt from me, began relating the themes of Utopian and Dystopian texts to their own lives. In multiple class discussions, students used the assigned Dystopian texts, especially, as a reference point for conveying the anxiety they were facing about their academic future. Furthermore, the discussion of fictional worlds in which the absolute ideal, or the absolute failure of ideals, were present made students desire specificity, which came through in their in-class writing and rhetorical essays. Having viewed the danger of sweeping generalizations both in fictional Dystopian worlds

and in real-life made students shy away from proclaiming such generalizations in their writing, and even caused them to lay a more specific and secure foundation for their arguments.

Though I provided no such parameters, about two-thirds of my class chose to write their final essays on local issues: either those specific to Louisiana, Baton Rouge, or LSU. Papers related to the budget deficient and its effects were popular, as students proposed state economic diversification or agricultural diversification as possible solutions. Even those who chose to focus on national or international issues seemed to work the budget deficit and it's possible Dystopian-like ramifications in to their final projects, either through introductory analogy or short anecdotes in the essay's body. Regardless of their topics, across the board students used the language of our Utopian and Dystopian texts and class discussions to present sophomore level argumentative essays which were both thought-provoking and passionate.

Not only did Utopian and Dystopian texts frame our class discussion on controversial issues, it also aided in the discussion of specific writing mechanics and techniques. For example, our class lesson on style included showing a clip from the first Hunger Games movie, in which Katniss and Peeta are given flaming outfits to make their Hunger Games debut. After discussing the reasons why we thought the stylist Cinna chose to dress the two tributes this way, as a class, we connected this idea to the importance of provocative word choice and engaging sentence structure. Quoting from my lecture notes, "Of course Katniss and Peeta are the same people without their flaming costumes, just like our arguments are the same before we add stylistic choices. But just like their costumes helped them to get sponsors in The Hunger Games, adding style to your papers will ultimately help to get your argument across more effectively, and solidify your ideas into the minds of your readers. Through your words, force your readers to remember the fire."

Student Response

The students themselves responded favorably to the courses theme, providing above average ratings on the end of the semester course evaluation survey. Individual comments on this survey were also overwhelmingly positive. For example, one student wrote that they "haven't looked at writing the same" since taking the course. Another student claimed that using the theme of Utopian and Dystopian worlds "made [class discussion] very relatable and easy to understand". Furthermore, in an individual conference meeting, one student remarked about the course theme, "sometimes looking at the big picture makes you want to zoom in and focus more on the small stuff. But it helps to talk about the big picture first, since you learn how to look at the details later." I cannot emphasize enough that these connections, between detailed writing and sweeping generalizations, between Dystopian worlds and my students' lives, between the importance of articulation and Katniss's revolution, were made organically, a natural transference that I would argue students are yearning for, even before stepping into the composition classroom. In the age of social media, making unprompted connections is as natural as catching Pokemon in the Walmart parking lot.

Conclusion

With the exception of that last joke, the majority of this paper was written in late May 2016. In an earlier draft, I added notes on how Utopian/Dystopian texts may also aid students in discussing events like the Black Lives Matter protests in Ferguson and incidents of police brutality towards people of color all over the United States. But these early notes were written before July 5th, 2016, the day that Baton Rouge local Alton Sterling was shot several times at close range by two Baton Rouge Police officers, it was written before the protests that followed his death, in which peaceful protesting citizens were brutally arrested, before the July 7th protest

in Dallas, TX in which 5 police officers were killed and 9 others wounded, and before July 17th, the day in which 3 Baton Rouge police officers were shot and killed, and several others were wounded. With these incidents, the city I teach in and the city my students learn in was thrust into the spotlight, becoming one of the many examples of the growing nationwide tension between people of color and police officers. Soon after, our area experienced what news broadcasters called the "1000-year flood", as 29 inches of rain fell in less than 48 hours, causing rivers to crest at record breaking heights. The devastation was so complete, that Baton Rouge's neighboring city, Denham Springs, reported 90% of homes were flooded in the storm, prompting the city's Mayor to lament: "It's just devastating, you see nothing but water." I can only speculate on how my Utopian and Dystopian course might have been different if these incidents had taken place during the time the course was held. And a month from now, or a week, or a couple of days, there could be another disaster to add to this list. And my fellow panelists and audience members undoubtedly have their own disasters and experiences of trauma that they see their students working through in our classrooms, through discussion or in their writing.

I'll leave you with some of my earlier notes which, of course, remain relevant, and will most likely continue to applicable:

Our students live in the age of hyperbole, where every film they see is the WORST MOVIE EVER, where they are bombarded by apocalyptic images of Ferguson protesters with police officers holding them down as fire surrounds them, where newscasters proclaim that the Republican nominee and/or the Democratic nominee's latest comment or threat of indictment signals the end of days, where their Facebook and Twitter feeds call for revolution, for anarchy, for unrest. Our students are already familiar with the language of Dystopia, and already jaded by the idea of Utopias, which perhaps accounts for the popularity of the genre in Young Adult

literature and film. What I hope that I have conveyed here, is that the Utopian/Dystopian genres can have a valuable place in the composition classroom. They can aid our students in proposing solutions to society's apocalyptic rhetoric, and they can give our students the language and resources needed for them to begin their lives as participatory citizens. Thank you.