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Dawn of the Undead Classroom:
Pop-Culture in the First-Year Composition Classroom

A Thesis by
Sierra A. Ellison

Chapman University
Orange, California

Wilkinson College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in English

August 2020

Committee in charge

Dr. Joanna Levin, Chair

Dr. Justine Van Meter

Professor Morgan Read-Davidson

The thesis of Sierra A. Ellison is approved.

Joanna Levin

Dr. Joanna Levin, Chair

J Van Meter

Dr. Justine Van Meter

Morgan Read-Davidson

Professor Morgan Read-Davidson

August 2020

Dawn of the Undead Classroom:
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ABSTRACT

Dawn of the Undead Classroom:

Pop-Culture in the First-Year Composition Classroom

by Sierra A. Ellison

Supplemented by the findings of her IRB certified research project, Sierra A. Ellison delves into the positive effects pop culture and genre have on the first-year composition classroom, exploring how engaging students through a common discourse that is relatable and comfortable can aid in their writing and composition progression. She explains how teaching under a framework such as the undead and examining these types of thematic material can engage students in the material and give students the space to open up about key issues like race, sex, politics, morality, and consumerism that they might be reluctant to discuss otherwise.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

After three years of reading, writing, hard work, laughs, tears, beers, and poetry readings, this thesis marks the end of my graduate career. It was, in all honesty, the most rewarding and life-changing experience of my life and one that I will always remember.

I am so thankful for the professors and mentors that taught me lessons, allowed me to grow, and gave me amazing opportunities to discover my passion for not only writing, but teaching as well.

I am thankful for the supportive people in my life. Those who stuck with me through the darkest times and smiled with me through the brightest.

Forever, I will be grateful for a journey that I chose and a path that I forged.

Cheers to the next one!

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Dawn of the Undead Classroom:
Pop-Culture in the First-Year Composition Classroom

In the spring of 2018, I was a bright-eyed twenty-seven-year-old graduate student with the opportunity to design and teach my first undergraduate writing and composition course. As I sat down and pondered what kind of course I would truly like to teach, I started thinking about a course that I would have liked to take as a first-year undergraduate student. I thought back to my rhetoric and writing class ten years prior and recalled that lack of connection I had felt with the material at that age. I remembered how often I had failed to engage with the text and tried to understand, as a graduate student, why that was. After a few conversations with my fellow classmates, I realized that I could not relate to the material that had contributed to my lack of connection with the texts.

During my first-year composition class, the class discussed and dissected very important rhetorical themes through various essays and texts. Unfortunately, because I had, at the time, the maturity and experience of an eighteen-year-old, I hadn't been interested in finding the connection to how the class or the material related to my life. At that time, I hadn't wanted to dig deeply into the material to see why it mattered to not only me and my education but to the

discourse it was a part of. As a graduate teaching associate, this realization baffled me. I suddenly felt the responsibility to create a class that was both engaging to my students and helpful in furthering their knowledge and understanding of writing and composition.

Moving forward, I researched numerous pedagogies and methodologies to help equip myself for the path ahead, all of which were helpful towards my day to day instructional techniques, but none of which answered the question I wanted answered: how to engage my students from the start of the semester. Further, how could I get their attention and hold on to it?

And then, while explaining to an MFA classmate about my passion and interest for the undead, it occurred to me— What about changing the framework? What about creating a theme for a course to spark a match in students’ minds? I went home and began my research on undead and pop-culture pedagogy and then promptly designed my class to be taught in the Fall of 2018 at Chapman University— English 103: Writing the Undead.

Supplemented by the findings of my IRB certified research project, I will delve into the positive effects pop culture and genre have on the composition classroom, exploring how engaging your students through a common discourse that is relatable and comfortable can aid in their writing and composition progression. I will explain how teaching under a framework such as the undead and examining these types of thematic material can give students the space to open up about key issues like race, sex, politics, morality, and consumerism that they might be reluctant to discuss otherwise.

Defining Engagement

As Bell Hooks expresses in her book *Teaching to Transgress*, student engagement is imperative because “there is a serious crisis in education. Students often do not want to learn and

teachers do not want to teach... We cannot address this crisis if progressive critical thinkers and social critics act as though teaching is not a subject worthy of our regard” (Hooks, 13). We, as educators, must do our part to build a new classroom and adopt new ways of teaching, learning, and expressing to captivate students. Like Hooks, I also “celebrate teaching that enables transgressions—a movement against and beyond boundaries,” because without it, I would not have advanced as far as I have in education and life.

As a student and professor, the term “engagement” has been passed around so frequently; it is challenging to understand what it truly means. In “Defining Student Engagement” by Rick D. Axelson and Arend Flick, they express that, more recently, “student engagement has come to refer to how *involved* or *interested* students appear to be in their learning and how *connected* they are to their classes, their institutions, and each other” (Axelson and Flick, 38). More specifically though, they reiterate thoughts on engagement from former National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) director at University of Indiana George Kuh, stating that engagement is defined as “the extent to which [students] take part in educationally effective practices,’ which enlarges the term to include activities besides studying—especially time spent in consultation with instructors” (Axelson and Flick, 40). It is the behavior, passion, dedication, and time of students in their relation to the class, class assignments, readings, discussions, peers, and instructors that encompasses the totality of engagement, not merely their involvement or interest in the class at a singular level.

Because my goal for my first-year composition class was to gauge student engagement based on creating a framework around the undead as well as building a classroom environment that garnered comfortability and openness, it was important to understand what engagement meant to me and how I would measure success.

My original thoughts on engagement were multi-faceted. First, students needed to be active participants in the class. By the term active, I am referring to student vocality inside *and* outside of the classroom. Understanding that some students are excited to raise their hands and ask questions, while others prefer to be more outspoken in online discussion boards or small group conversations. Both, in my mind, were valid contributions towards class engagement.

Closely related to participation in class was student participation in readings and class/homework. If students were truly engaged, they would not only read the material or complete the homework, but also delve deeper and come to class/discussions with questions, comments, or new perceptions. It was the expectation that engaged students would go above and beyond expectations outside of the classroom because their excitement, passion, or interest in the class would transcend outside the class when no instructor was *watching over them*.

Further, engaged students would exceed expectations on larger projects. By exceeding expectations, I am not referring to the expectations towards grades, but instead the effort the student puts into going outside of the recommended or supplied sources to build arguments. It is the attempt to think outside of the box and push further for the sake of trying new things or pushing the limits, not merely to get an “A.”

Working hand in hand with exceeding expectations, an engaged student is one that thinks critically, or as Bell Hooks defines as “a process learned by reading theory and actively analyzing texts” (Hook, 20). Most importantly, it is the action of analysis. First, on assigned readings and sought out texts, then on their thoughts and writing. After analyzing, engaged students would take advantage of opportunities to amend previous drafts, understanding composing as a process.

Finally, engaged students work with instructors and fellow students to get new or broader outlooks or opinions on concepts. Krista Kennedy and Rebecca Moor Howard express the importance of collaboration in their essay “Collaborative Writing, Print to Digital” in the book, *A Guide to Composition Pedagogies* stating, that “collaborative learning is ‘a way of engaging students more deeply with text’ and collaborative pedagogy provides ‘a social context in which students can experience and practice the kinds of conversation valued by college teachers’” (Kennedy and Howard, 37). Students should search for other or differing perspectives both because of their passion for the material as well as the understanding that their knowledge is limited to their personal experience. This could look like asking questions, having thoughtful conversations in and out of the classroom, or looking to instructors or peers for clarification on ideas or perceptions.

In understanding and gaining student engagement, instructors must look to what we ask of our students and think outside the box. We must open our minds to new and inventive ways in order to free up space for attention and learning. As Hooks expresses, “engaged pedagogy does not seek simply to empower students. Any classroom that employs a holistic model of learning will also be a place where teachers grow, and are empowered by the process” (Hooks, 20). I intended to observe my Writing the Undead course, to understand the effectiveness of my original perceptions, how I could improve, and the aspects that I have not yet begun to understand.

Pop Culture Composition Classroom Rationale

The act of writing, composing, and understanding rhetoric is a complex one. In *Learning by Teaching*, Donald Murray speaks about invention in the process of writing and composition. He

states that “it is the process of exploration of what we know and what we feel about what we know through language... The writer, as he writes, is making ethical decisions. He doesn’t test his words by a rule book, but by life” (Murray, 15).

It was my goal, as an instructor of a first-year composition class, to guide students towards understanding how to digest information, analyze the arguments presented, draw conclusions, and then construct their findings in researched and persuasive writing or presentations. As Steven Lynn expresses in his book, *Rhetoric and Composition: An Introduction*, “Writing teachers today generally expect students to think for themselves, not to recycle someone else’s ideas” (Lynn, 37). Yet, as my own experience with composition revealed, if, in the writing classroom, students find themselves at a loss for life experiences to draw from in relation to class material, the uphill climb towards critical thinking and data assimilation can become much more challenging. Like most learned practices, knowledge and expertise can be more easily attained if the tasks are broken down into smaller pieces. This challenge can be solved in various ways but limited the topic of a course to a more specific or relatable one, allows the students to focus on how to achieve their goals rather than how to understand the information they are trying to analyze.

The undead, and related works surrounding it, can be thought of as a genre. But, because the variety of content is wide and spans over centuries, it was a deep enough bag to pull from. What was more important though, was setting up the expectations of what I wanted from the students, as I was still teaching a composition course and not a history of vampires and zombies. So, in thinking about how to do so, I found Ann Freadman’s metaphor of a game, noted in *A Guide to Composition Pedagogies*, to be a perfect explanation of how to tackle the challenge. Amy J. Devitt reiterated Freadman’s thinking, stating that genre should be used, “as ‘rules for

play’ so that ‘ knowing the rules is knowing how much play the rules allow and how to play with them”’(Devitt, 148). Devitt goes on to say that, “teaching the etiquette of a particular genre involves teaching the context, time and place, audiences’ expectations, and strategies for working within the genre” (Devitt, 148). It was with this notion in mind that I paid very close attention to the scaffolding of my class and explanations of projects, readings, and assignments.

I wanted the class to start with a heavy understanding of what rhetoric was. In having the class begin with a reading of Lloyd F. Bitzer’s essay, “The Rhetorical Situation,” it set the framework for the overall focus of the course. On the first day of class, I asked the students what rhetoric was. Unsurprisingly, the responses geared more towards political debates. As Bitzer explains at the start of his essay, it is important that students understand that rhetoric is used in everything we write and say. He states, “When I ask, What is a rhetorical situation? I want to know the nature of those contexts in which speakers or writers create rhetorical discourse. How should they be described? What are their characteristics? Why and how do they result in the creation of rhetoric?” (Bitzer, 1). After reading the article, I asked again what rhetoric, or the rhetorical situation was, and their responses became more thoughtful and understanding.

The next step was to not only allow them to understand what rhetoric was, but then to apply it to our genre of study. After reading Bitzer’s essay, the students were assigned to read Shannon Winnubst’s essay, “Vampires, Anxieties, and Dreams: Race and Sex in the Contemporary United States” that focuses on how “several feminist and anti-racist theorists use the trope of the vampire to unravel how whiteness, maleness, and heterosexuality feed on the same set of disavowals—of the body, of the Other, of fluidity, of dependency itself,” (Winnubst, 1).

While reading, the students were asked to focus on a few key topics:

1. What specific techniques did Winnubst use to further her argument?
2. Were these techniques successful? Why, or why not?
3. Why do you think she used vampires as a way to discuss and/or unpack these sensitive topics?
4. Had you ever thought of vampires or vampire lore in this way before?

All of the questions were very important to kick-start my students' critical thinking in regards to understanding how to draw conclusions from academic texts, but the last question was key to moving forward with a genre-centered class. In asking this question, it was my intention to open their minds to the possibility that any subject has the capability for critical thought and exploration. During the class, we were going to dissect zombie apocalypses, ghosts, spirits, and vampires. It was important for them to understand that although these topics, characters, and lore had been a part of their lives for years, it was their responsibility to look for deeper meanings and come to new conclusions.

Creating a Foundation of Comfort and Relatability

In his essay, "Pedagogy of the Living Dead: Using Students' Prior Knowledge to Explore Perspective," Allan Nail discusses teaching English language arts to high school students on-site at a community college with the framework or theme of the undead. Like me, Nail wanted to engage students in the subject matter and felt that the undead would be a great place to start. Anticipating my own reservations, he stated that he, "knew the undead would hold the interest of [his] students, but just because something is interesting does not make it appropriate for the classroom" (Nail, 49). This was an especially important obstacle in my course creation because I

would be teaching a first-year undergraduate composition class, not a creative writing or literature class. So, my solution was to find/choose essays, articles, stories, and novels that both complimented the theme and illustrated the rhetorical concepts that are typically addressed in the composition classroom.

Nail thought rather critically about the texts and other works he discussed in his class, but he also commented on the idea that, “the undead could be used as a device for exploring what students already know, how they know it, and how that knowledge affects their understanding of the world” (Nail, 50). This concept was the centerpiece for my class’s structure. Like Nail, I wanted to acknowledge my students’ knowledge of the undead in the beginning of the semester to establish that they were in some ways already “experts” in the discourse into which we were entering. This allowed them to feel more comfortable with the material and, although they didn’t always understand the more challenging texts, they seemed more open to discussing the topics and/or asking questions about specific sections that they were having a hard time grasping. This comradery, or common ground, between the students seemed to create a sense of safety in the classroom. Every single person had encountered some form of the undead before entering into the class. Most commonly, the students had seen movies and tv shows like *Twilight*, *Underworld*, *The Walking Dead*, and *The Vampire Diaries*. A few of them had read more current novels or comic books, and a handful had read or seen a few classic works like *Dracula*, *Interview With a Vampire*, and *Nosferatu*. This previous experience allowed them to connect with the texts on a preliminary level, leaving room to build on a strong foundation of comfort. Nail described this idea as a, “pop-cultural twist on Jung’s notion of the collective unconsciousness— information we share as a culture, even if we are unaware of how we know it” (Nail, 50).

Creating a foundation of comfort, in a world adjacent to but outside of the one we live in, seems to create a welcoming space where students become more open to discussion, specifically discussions regarding more challenging topics such as, race, sex, politics, and morality. Much like Nail's class, where his students' "comments reflected issues of gender, politics, media, and the changing role of broadcast news" (Nail, 53), in my own classroom, these conversations were ones that engaged students in the discourse and material as well as allowed them to practice their skills in identifying audience, defining tone, and choosing a precise argument. As Diana George, Tim Lockridge, and John Timbur explain in their essay "Cultural Studies and Composition," in the book, *A Guide to Composition Pedagogies*, "The questions first raised by that original cultural studies moment in composition have shifted, become more complex, perhaps even farther reaching. For the cultural-studies-influenced writing class today, that shift is especially evident any time a teacher asks students to move their investigations out of the classroom—physically or virtually...and pay serious attention to the world as lived experience both local and transnational" (George, Lockridge, Timbur, 105).

I can recall a specific class where we were dissecting the idea of "otherness" after reading the essay, "'Powerful, Beautiful, and Without Regret': Femininity, Masculinity, and the Vampire Aesthetic" written by Joan Grassbaugh Forry in the collection, *Zombies, Vampires, and Philosophy: New Life for the Undead*. We discussed how vampires have been depicted through history as predominantly white males, and how society, in some aspects, has depicted the vampire as the *ideal specimen*, "the ultimate affirmation of individualism, escaping from human moral obligation, caring only for themselves, and free from regret or remorse for their actions" (Forry, 238). The essay explained that white "male" vampires were generally the only ones to be admired or fawned over. In the majority of vampire texts and pop culture, "female vampires are

usually punished and rendered powerless, either through ridicule or death, while male vampires flourish, or languish, in elegance and style” (Forry, 239).

The conversation then strayed towards the students’ own experience with otherness. Whether it be race, sex, or sexual orientation, the students shared their stories and how they related to, or differed from, traditionally privileged subject positions. Further along in the conversation, an Asian American student confessed that he had been called many derogatory names throughout his life, and that he “didn’t really care anymore.” In response, I asked if he truly didn’t care, or if he had been conditioned not to care. It was then that he explained that the individuals that had most commonly called him racist names were his friends of a different minority while he was growing up. He went on to explain that he had always believed it to be more acceptable for people of different minority groups to call him names because they were also “other.” As a white woman, I had never experienced this for myself, and expressed that although I had witnessed the dynamic he was referring to, it didn’t seem to be an acceptable way to treat anyone, no matter the situation. A conversation was sparked and eventually the original student expressed that he didn’t believe it was okay, in any circumstance, to do such things as it is continuing to perpetuate the feeling and stereotype of otherness.

This specific example was just that, specific. Throughout the course, I felt that the students drew conclusions in response to the assigned texts through their own experiences or the experiences of others in many, if not most, of our discussions. And although the discussion mentioned above was not particularly focused on the writing or rhetoric of the text we were reading, it gave the student the ability to look at text and argument in a different way. The text and open dialog gave him the common ground and relatability to engage with the material and then have space to create complex opinions on the subject matter. Most of the students seemed to

understand that the arguments were meant to be questioned, not merely acknowledged or regurgitated.

In *A Guide to Composition Pedagogies*, Amy Devitt discusses how to effectively make teaching genre pedagogy work. She states that, “the goal is not to enable students to produce competent literacy narratives, rhetorical analyses, or creative hypertexts. Rather, studying and producing those genres serve other ends, whether increasing rhetorical flexibility, writing more effectively within unfamiliar writing situations or within new technologies, or developing critical thinking and effecting change” (Devitt, 157). My experience using genre and pop cultural pedagogies suggests that students may be able to use their skills and knowledge across contexts, discourses, and mediums to think critically and creatively.

Crossing Composition and Creative Writing

In the essay, “Composing Creativity: Further Crossing Composition/Creative Writing Boundaries,” Chris Drew and David Yost explain that creative writing and composition have long been at odds with one another: “Paul Ketzle, for example, describes the ‘position of creative writing in the academy’ as ‘tenuous,’ leaving those who practice it ‘a defensive lot when it comes to justifying what we do’” (Drew, Yost, 25); they further note that “in no other area of the university are the internecine hostilities as frequent and vocal as those between its professional teachers or professors of literature and its invited poets or novelists” (Drew, Yost, 26). Although tensions between some creative writing and rhetoric/composition programs have decreased, thinking outside the box and creating a hybrid class that combines both composition and creative writing to teach students rhetoric and composition can be a challenge.

The essay, “‘Studies in Composition and Rhetoric:’ Teaching Creative Writing: Theories and Practices,” written by Kwame Dawes and Christy Friend, delves into the ways in which someone might successfully meld both creative writing and composition studies into one effective class. They begin to explain that, “despite institutional histories that separate us, creative writing and composition nonetheless hold ‘a common position in relation to a shared object—the study, practice, and teaching of writing’ (Dawes, Friend, 113). Creative writing and composition are both, at the end of the day, writing or the study of writing. In both a short story and an academic article, we can find an argument that can be dissected, a voice to be questioned, and an audience to be identified. As Dawes and Friend argue, “creative writing and composition course have similar goals; both teach students ‘critical reading skills, the elements of craft, general persuasive writing skills, and an appreciation for literary works’ (Dawes, Friend, 114).

Coming from a creative writing background, with a bachelor’s degree in television and film and in the process of obtaining an MFA in creative writing, I was intrigued by adding a creative writing pedagogy to my course. I knew, however, that when choosing literature as a key element to my class, I had to be sure that the readings had a very specific focus and needed to be used as a method for furthering composition instruction and not simply a fun subject to teach or learn. By this, I am referring to the notion that Christine Farris touches on in her essay on literature and composition pedagogy in *A Guide to Composition Pedagogies*. She states that “when we choose to use literature in a writing course, we need to attend to what purpose it serves, and why others might applaud or attest its use” (Farris, 164).

In choosing the literary readings for the course, their purpose was best served as a supplement, or diving point, for more complex thoughts and conversations. For example, when the students read a scary story about zombies, I also assigned an article on the “zombie-like”

consumerism of American culture. Initially, the two seemed un-connected, but if I then asked the students to change their perspective on the scary story and to see it as a metaphor for consumerism, their understanding and critical thinking about the story would deepen and expand.

For example, when the class read Matthew Walker's essay, "When There's No More Room in Hell, The Dead Will Shop the Earth: Romero and Aristotle on Zombies, Happiness, and Consumption," from *Zombies, Vampires, and Philosophy*, we discussed the ceaseless need for humans to consume things, much like mindless zombies and their need for human flesh, or brains. Walker calls upon Aristotle's definition of *pleonexia*, "the overreaching desire for the goods of fortune [or] the disposition to have more," as well as Ancient Greek theory, *athanatos*, the "desire to live without limit," to help bridge the gap between the fantasy of the mindless undead to the everyday consumer "shuffling down the aisles, staring vacantly into space, consuming without end" (Walker, 81). This sparked a heated conversation on not only the consumption of physical goods but also the consumption of information—most predominantly, social media. These easy, yet complex connections brought up by the selected readings helped to prepare the students for larger projects, in which I asked them to draw connections between differing contexts, ideas, and genres to construct an argument or essay.

Like Dawes and Friend, mixing up the type of content and text throughout the course allowed students the opportunity to see the material with a fresh pair of eyes. Dawes and Friend reference Wendy Bishop, who "further recommends that first-year composition curricula expand their purview to encompass creative genres as well as academic ones, contending that students would find such courses more engaging and more relevant" (Dawes, Friend, 114). Since the main goal of my course was to engage students in writing and composition, I felt that adding a combination of different types of texts and assignments would work well to foster engagement.

Similarly to Dawes and Friend, who stated that they, “required that every student, regardless of his or her major, craft and submit both creative and scholarly projects...to push students to work both within and outside of their comfort zones” (Dawes, Friend, 115), I found giving a range of texts and opportunities to first-year composition students allowed them to become more malleable in their thinking and their practice of analyzing rhetoric from multiple viewpoints and in producing multimodal compositions.

Practicing Procedures

In formulating my first-year composition course, “Writing the Undead,” it was important to assign a variety of assignments that helped my students build towards the final project, an intertextuality and culture inquiry paper, where they were asked to produce a final essay that built a critical argument supported by the themes or underlying messages within the novel “I am Legend” in combination with an intertextual work of their choosing. They were encouraged not only to use evidence from the chosen texts, but also to research historical, societal, or psychological academic essays and articles to support their papers as well as to use their own experiences and opinions to further their arguments and add rhetorical context.

To introduce the students to the discourse of the undead, their first assignment asked them to create a zombie apocalypse preparedness plan in the form of a letter to a specific audience. This allowed them to dive into the thematic elements of the class as well as begin practicing research skills that would be a constant requirement throughout the rest of the semester. Their second assignment was a cinematic inquiry presentation that allowed students to refine their research abilities further as well as introduce them to the idea of intertextuality and making connections between different works, cinematic and literary. Students composed a

multimodal presentation about the film, “Zombieland,” analyzing the social, cultural, and rhetorical elements of the film. Finally, students were instructed to create a personal narrative or short story in the theme of the course that attempted to mimic the tone and argument of creative themes and writers discussed in class. The key in this assignment was to get students to not only read but understand and practice the tone, audience, and voice of the undead genre. More specifically, I wanted the students to understand what they wanted their audience to feel, understand, or internalize after reading the piece. If they wanted to leave the reader feeling uneasy or scared, what techniques could they use? Should they shorten their sentences during the climax to create suspense and move the story forward at an alarming rate? What point of view would have the greatest impact? All of the questions were a large part of the discussions leading up to the project deadline.

For each of the assignments mentioned above, I wanted to create a process-based paradigm to allow them to view their writing as a multi-staged process and to attempt to move students away from the “last-minute essay cram” that they may have gotten away with in previous classes. More specifically, it was imperative to create a relationship with my students and their writing that focused on invention, focused free-writing, workshopping, and revision. Steven Lynn expresses in *Rhetoric and Composition: An Introduction* that “free-writing...can be extremely valuable for some students sometimes, helping them to write those most difficult words, the first ones, and helping them to understand how real writers experiment and play around with ideas, not worrying about the final product of the process” (Lynn, 33). Invention, as I have touched on before, is the act of creating. This emphasis on invention, tied with focused free-writing, allowed students the time in class to not only begin projects but also discuss their newly forming ideas with their peers and their instructor. Although the act of

writing is a solitary one, I wanted to create time, space, and opportunity for them to ask questions, speak through forming ideas, and challenge them to work through blockages.

During the preparation of the Zombie Preparedness Plan, students were asked to research various zombie apocalypse plans and incorporate the appropriate research into the specific zombie apocalypse that they were writing for. For one student, they took a more general “zombie takeover” situation but focused intently on the details and skills needed to survive. The piece started with:

“To whoever finds this letter,

Here you are. Probably sitting reading this letter as your heart beats a million times per second. However you got to this letter consider yourself lucky. The world has been destroyed and a virus has spread killing any human on earth that gets it. Luckily for you, you don’t have it. This virus turns people into brainless creatures called zombies. They hunt for human flesh and walk around scavenging for anything with life. They are slow, but if you aren’t aware, they become quicker than you think. Don’t be scared though... one advantage you have over them is that YOU are alive. Now let's begin the process of how to stay alive.”

Here, the student has set up various factors in order to prepare the audience for the world they have created.

1. The audience now knows that the world has collapsed. This is not the beginning of the virus takeover.
2. If the person is still alive, they were not affected by the initial virus.

3. The zombies in this world are a combo of the slow, drone-like ones, and the quick, smarter ones that you find in more recent zombie stories.

These elements were key to the assignment as one of the main focuses for this initial project was to focus on understanding audience, tone, the rhetorical triangle, and detail. The students were instructed to create specific situations and to think critically on how someone might survive the situations they built.

Later in the piece— after discussing food, supplies, and safety— the student focused on the type of people to surround yourself with during an apocalypse situation.

“The last thing I can help you with are other people. Keep trustworthy people with you and leave the others. Put yourself first, because even heroes get other people killed. There is also a strength in numbers...An ideal group of people would be 5.

Person 1: Has medical practice to fix wounds, bones, or sicknesses other than the virus.

Person 2: Knows how to use weapons so everyone can be taught to kill.

Person 3: Can plant and keep the food available for everyone.

Person 4: A navigator who can get everyone somewhere safely through escape routes.

Person 5: Creative, can find other ways to use tools as a fall back if something goes wrong.”

I found this addition to be novel and creative. When I asked the student how they came up with this idea, they admitted to having discussions with their roommates in the dorms where the group developed this idea. For me, this was a perfect example of why popular culture can be such a great starting point for the writing classroom. This student was not the first who stated

that they discussed class material with others outside of the classroom, and because of this, they were able to come up with new and interesting ideas to expand on their original drafts.

In wanting to create a welcoming environment for my students as well as teach them the importance of revision in writing, I believed it was imperative that each assignment was supplemented by class workshops, and more importantly, peer revision. In *A Guide to Composition Pedagogies*, Chris M. Anson expresses the pros of process pedagogy, explaining that, “the writing process can be divided into three distinct stages, *prewriting*, *writing*, and *rewriting*” (Anson, 216). But with this model of instruction and focus, it becomes imperative to “shift the orientation of learning away from expectations of a final text and towards developing the knowledge and abilities needed to produce it.” So, in my instruction, I made it clear that students could revise papers and projects to allow them the opportunity to continue to grow as students, writers, and critical thinkers, rather than focus on the grade and the grade alone. And, although most students did not take advantage of the ability to revise, the ones that did were thankful for the opportunity and I felt as though their work and their understanding of how to make changes helped them and their work grow exponentially.

Assigned Texts

As I have stated previously, it was very important to me that I create a class that was engaging to the students but also introduced them to a wide range of texts, ideas, voices, and viewpoints. Because of this, I focused on building a reading list that brought a diversity of topics and writers.

The texts included:

- Greene, Richard. *Zombies, Vampires, and Philosophy: New Life for the Undead*. Open Court, 2012.

- Matheson, Richard, et al. *I Am Legend*. Eclipse Books, 1991.
- Bitzer, Lloyd F. “The Rhetorical Situation.” *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 1.1 (1968): 1-14.
- Crowley, Sharon, and Debra Hawhee. “Ancient Rhetorics for Contemporary Students.” Pearson Education, Mercury Reader | Pearson, www.pearson.com/us/higher-education/product/Crowley-Ancient-Rhetorics-for-Contemporary-Students-5th-Edition/9780205175482.html.
- Winnubst, Shannon. “Vampires, Anxieties, and Dreams: Race and Sex in the Contemporary United States.” *Hypatia*, vol. 18, no. 3, 2003, pp. 1–20., doi:10.1111/j.1527-2001.
- Hegeman, Susan. “Histories of the Other.” *American Literary History*, vol. 15, no. 3, 1 Oct. 2003, pp. 625–638.
- Herrmann, Andrew F. “Ghosts, Vampires, Zombies, and Us.” *International Review of Qualitative Research*, vol. 7, no. 3, 2014, pp. 327–341., doi:10.1525/irqr.2014.7.3.327.
- Beer, Janet, and Avril Horner. “‘This Isn't Exactly a Ghost Story’: Edith Wharton and Parodic Gothic.” *Journal of American Studies*, vol. 37, no. 2, 2003, pp. 269–285.
- Butler, Octavia E. “The Evening and the Morning and the Night.” *Callaloo*, vol. 14, no. 2, 1991, p. 477., doi:10.2307/2931653.
- Landwehr, Margarete. “Introduction: Literature and the Visual Arts; Questions of Influence and Intertextuality.” *College Literature*, vol. 29, no. 3, 2002, pp. 1–16.
- Sutherland, Meghan. “Rigor/Mortis: The Industrial Life of Style in American Zombie Cinema.” *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media*, vol. 48, no. 1, 2007, pp. 64–78.
- “Welcome To The Post-Apocalypse: An Open Letter From The Martyrs of The New World.” *Geek and Sundry*, 13 May 2015, geekandsundry.com/welcome-to-the-post-apocalypse-a-open-letter-from-the-martyrs-of-the-new-world/.
- Diehl, Laura. “American Germ Culture: Richard Matheson, Octavia Butler, and the (Political) Science of Individuality.” *Cultural Critique*, vol. 85, 2013, pp. 84–121.

These texts bring very different learning opportunities to the classroom, and although I do believe it can still be even more well-rounded, it was a great start at an effective reading list. As a collection of essays on the undead, *Zombies, Vampires, and Philosophy: New Life for the Undead* was chock-full of interesting concepts and discussion starters. The quality of the essays varied a bit, so I would be sure to pick and choose the essays to teach, but overall, I enjoyed using this collection as a way to spark interest and begin to think critically about the undead and the arguments surrounding it.

On the other hand, it was imperative to find certain works that would be more of a mental challenge for the students. Whereas the collection mentioned above had more digestible arguments, adding a plethora of complex essays like, “Vampires, Anxieties, and Dreams: Race and Sex in the Contemporary United States,” “Rigor/Mortis: The Industrial Life of Style in American Zombie Cinema,” and, “Histories of the Other,” that may be more of a challenge to students but allow for clarifying questions as well as room for growth and understanding. All of these are supplemented by essays specifically focused on rhetoric and composition like, “The Rhetorical Situation,” “Ancient Rhetorics for Contemporary Students,” and, “Introduction: Literature and the Visual Arts; Questions of Influence and Intertextuality” in order to give context and understanding of our main goal, which is to further their understanding of rhetoric and composition as well as their ability to think critically about the topics discussed and break down, as well as form arguments regarding the material discussed.

Testing Hypotheses

After obtaining my IRB approval, I distributed permission forms to my students who were willing to participate in my research. I received permission to administer surveys about

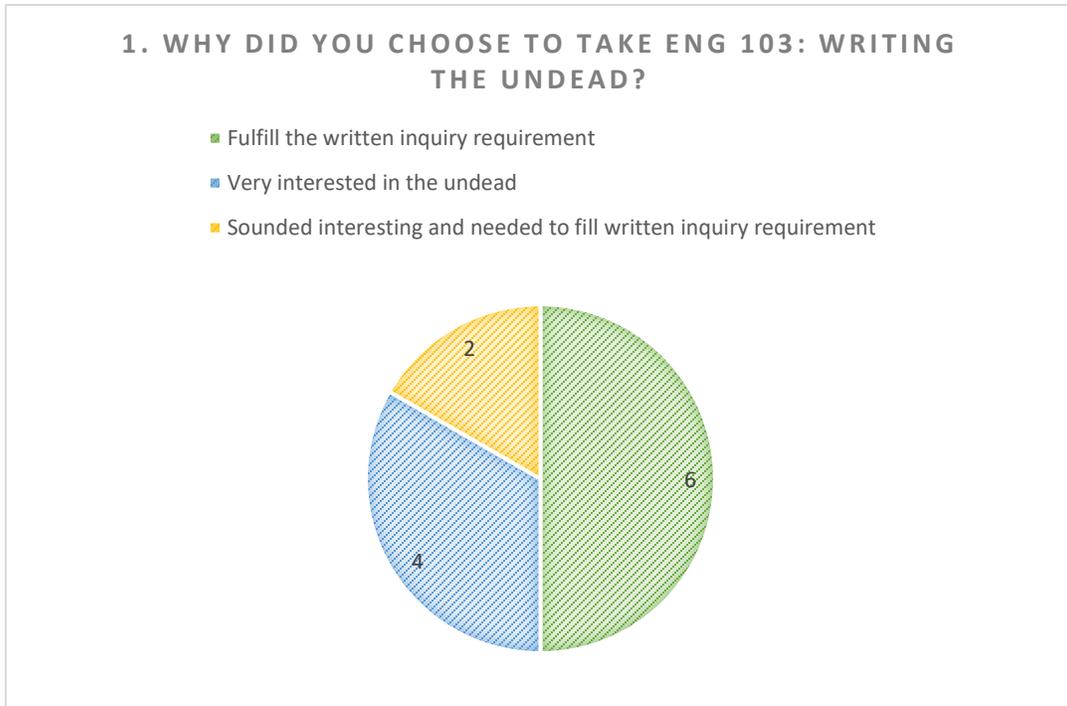
their thoughts and feelings about the class and their developing abilities, as well as permission to analyze their work over the semester to gauge their improvement over the semester against their perceived engagement in the theme and the class.

The results discussed in the section below are split into two categories: Surveys and Student work. I wanted to display the student surveys first because the juxtaposition between students' thoughts about the course, their progression, and the qualitative/quantitative analysis of the student work helps to give a holistic view of the course in its entirety.

Student Survey Results

Survey Question #1: Why did you choose to take ENG 103: Writing the Undead?

Before I administered the surveys, I had been almost certain that students had chosen to take my undead class because of the subject matter. From the first day of class, they seemed excited about the subject matter, and I assumed that this had to do with the fact that they had chosen this class for the theme. But, when I reviewed the students' surveys, I was shocked at what I found. Not only did the majority of the students not originally choose the class for the theme, but many of them also didn't even know about the class topic before the first day of class. As you can see in the diagram below, 50% of the students surveyed chose the class to "fulfill their Seminar in rhetoric and writing seminar," 33% chose the class because the class description, "peeked [their] personal interest," and 17%, "thought it sounded interesting and [they] needed to fill their written inquiry requirement."



Survey Question #2: How has the theme of the Undead helped you to learn about rhetoric and writing?

In asking this question, I wanted to keep an open mind. I didn't want to assume what the students were going to say beforehand because every answer could be unique to each student. But, there were definite themes in the student responses to this question.

The first theme affirmed the hypothesis that had led me to create the class. Students said that they thought the class was “interesting,” “fun,” and “new.” They explained that learning about rhetoric and writing through the undead helped them to connect to the material in a new and engaging way.

THEME 1 EXAMPLES:

1. “Having a specific and engaging theme has made it fun to do assignments, and encourages me to do the reading when in other classes, I may not. It provides new and interesting ways to look at and learn rhetoric and writing.”
2. “The undead added an interesting subject to and [sic] uninteresting skill.”

3. “It helped because I can relate zombies easier to rhetoric and writing.”

The second theme was an interesting and slightly unexpected one. Students seemed to feel that because they were looking at texts through a “fictional” lens because vampires and zombies aren’t real, they thus were able to discuss and reflect on social and societal issues in a more relatable environment. They felt that it “broadened their perspectives” and allowed them to view opinions from an “unbiased” mindset so that they would then be able to dissect arguments more effectively, specifically noting the different aspects of “persuasion” in rhetoric and how to identify it.

THEME 2 EXAMPLES:

1. “This theme has broadened my perspective on minority and majority type topics and have a better understanding of the different situations people come from.”
2. “I believe the different perspectives and viewpoints offered on the undead show the value of different opinions and unbiased statements in writing.”
3. “It has helped me to learn how to argue points about the flexibility of perception.”
4. “It has gotten me to really think about all the possible scenarios for the undead and causes us to persuade people about our thoughts on them.”

Survey Question #3: What have you been most intrigued about in this class so far?

To me, students must grasp the material being taught, but I was also interested in discovering what held student engagement throughout the class because, based on my hypothesis, if I would be able to spark engagement and hold onto it, students would be more active and willing to push the boundaries in their writing and in class. Students appreciated the range of material assigned as well as the discussions that followed the weekly readings. I had very few issues in student participation during our rhetorical and theoretical discussions on the

assigned text. This was the case regardless of the material. Surprisingly, I felt that in some cases, students were more opinionated and outspoken after reading critical essays about the undead versus classes when we discussed the novel, *I am Legend*. For example, when we discussed the essay, “Femininity, Masculinity, and the Vampire Aesthetic,” from the book, *Vampires, Zombies and Philosophy*, students were enthusiastically debating about how the argument of the piece could be strengthened. For instance, many students felt that the author used too many over-generalizing statements on how male and female vampires were depicted in pop culture. They agreed with her on many of her claims but felt that in statements like, “In the realm of the Undead, the male vampire becomes a beautiful martyr while the female vampire becomes a disastrous woman whom we love to hate,” Forry was using limited, or cherry-picked examples to back up her claims (Forry, 247).

On a class-by-class basis, the students referenced specific sections asked clarifying questions and drew connections from the text to current and past societal issues. These findings were evident in the answer to what they were intrigued by throughout the class. It seemed like it was not merely the material that they were intrigued by but the material in combination with the questions they were asked to answer about the texts.

QUESTION THREE ANSWER EXAMPLES:

1. “almost every class I learn a new way to debate or...write about a certain topic.”
2. “[I am] intrigued about finding arguments within readings and trying to find the holes and weaker points within them.”
3. “[I am] intrigued by the different perspectives on the purpose of the undead... that I hadn’t thought of before.”

4. “I’ve really enjoyed the types of assignments because they are more interesting than just essays. I’ve found it interesting to do... assignments, analyzing and arguing, while using different mediums and focusing on the undead topics.”

Survey Question #4: How do you feel your writing or reading abilities have been impacted by the class thus far?

This question was very important to my perception of how successfully I designed and instructed the course. Student engagement is only as important as it contributes to the evolution and growth of the students. And in asking this question, I was aware that the students might not have a clear or realistic perception of their progression or development in rhetoric and composition, but I believed that it was still important to engage their self-perceived growth because of the class. If they felt as though they were moving forward, learning, and growing, then their commitment towards continuing to practice the skills taught throughout the semester after the class has ended would seem to be more of a possibility.

The answers to this question were almost unanimously positive, which was encouraging, but as I suspected, the level detail in their responses was slightly lacking. I would have liked to interview each of the students to gain a better understanding of how they would more specifically define their progress and/or understanding of rhetoric and composition. One almost universal aspect that students felt that they gained from the class was they were able to understand how to think about writing in a different way. Many stated that they felt that they now could spot and dissect arguments. Additionally, they would add that this was a skill they did not have before entering the class. So, although I feel that the class may have fallen slightly short in the instruction of rhetorical terminology and background, the skill to analyze text for argument, voice, tone, and audience seems to have been communicated quite effectively.

QUESTION FOUR ANSWER EXAMPLES:

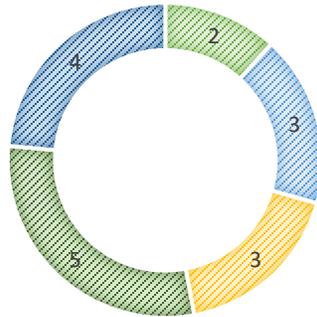
1. "I feel that by writing in different ways... my writing ability and creative thinking skills have improved. I've begun to think about reading and writing less literally, and have enjoyed the new ideas this class has inspired."
2. "I have been able to read books/articles that require more effort and are a little bit harder to understand, expanding my reading levels."
3. "I think that I've learned to write better in a sense that I've expanded my method of thinking because [of] this class. I've learned to express ideas more than just quoting academic essays."
4. "I have been able to express my thoughts in a way I never thought I could and I have learned ways to think outside of the box."

Evaluating Student Work and Progress

In quantifying the results of my evaluation of my students' work, I thought that the most efficient and easy way to see the wholistic picture would be to start at their grade changes from Sample 1 assignment to Sample 2 assignment. Displayed in the graph below, I have charted the grading changes for each of my 17 students. In reviewing this, I was somewhat surprised at the amount of regression in the grades, as I didn't feel that the students' work had regressed as a whole. Looking at this, I believe that as a first-time graduate teaching associate, I was learning how to grade their work effectively. I believe that on Sample 1 assignment, I was more lenient with my grades, and with the amount of time, progression in the semester, and time that students had to work on Sample 2 assignment, I was less forgiving.

PROGRESSION OF STUDENT GRADES FROM SAMPLE 1 TO SAMPLE 2

■ Improved vastly ■ Improved slightly ■ No Change ■ Regressed slightly ■ Regressed vastly



Although, I can't deny the results and how over half of the students' work seemed to regress, at least slightly, from Sample 1 to Sample 2 assignment. This was initially a bit concerning to me. Why was the work seeming to decrease in quality? Was it in fact the quality, a mid-semester slump, or did it have to do with Sample 2 assignment being a creative writing assignment? I guessed that it differed from student to student, and in a closer look into a few of the students below, I decided to map out the changes in the student work from a qualitative perspective.

I came to the conclusions below by re-reading the student work as well as my notes to the students at the time. It did seem to be a student by student situation, with some commonality in the rushed quality of the creative writing assignment.

Student	Sample 1 to 2 Improvement	
Student 1	S	Somewhat improved. Took notes well on voice and tone as well as being more specific in their argument.
Student 2	V	Vastly improved. Understood who the audience was in the Sample 2 assignment. Sentence level writing was very much improved. The engagement in the creative writing assignment seemed to be a real trigger for the improvement in writing. Seemed to really think about the voice and tone in Sample assignment 2.
Student 3	N/R	Stayed consistent or regressed slightly. This student didn't seem to make many changes in their writing from one assignment to the next. They had many of the same issues, not a completely well thought-out story/concept. It seemed more off the cuff than a planned attack.
Student 4	R	The student seemed to put a lot of thought and effort into the Sample 1 assignment, but Sample 2 assignment felt rushed. Although time was given to work on Sample 2 assignment in class, I think it would have been helpful to have more stringent rules for the workshop to ensure that the students had a bigger portion of the assignment done for the rough draft.

Key:
V: Improved Vastly
S: Improved Slightly
N: Regressed Slightly
R: Regressed Vastly

To my surprise and delight, however, I was quite impressed overall by the progression from the second assignment to the final papers. Students seemed to have broken away from the “typical” or “dry” essay and formulated original and interesting papers that created clear arguments while intertwining different texts and concepts together. I feel that the overall progression of the students writing abilities was positive.

To call on a specific example, one student wrote a final paper titled, “Human vs. The Other: Who is Who?” where they explored various literary texts, tv shows, and psychological essays to dissect the complexity of humans’ capability for evil, or evil acts. At the heart of the essay, the student writes,

“Studies believe that humans may truly be DNA wired to kill, and that violence has actually shaped our biology throughout evolution. Physically, scientists attest that hand proportions have evolved to shape hands into more effective weapons to defend oneself...Mentally speaking, even while still developing in the womb, a person’s genetic basis can greatly be linked to their future behavior, due to the adaptive behaviors of previously evolved species. So, violence being a main aspect of society’s ancestors, makes it much easier to be prevalent in the future of most human behavior. Furthermore, a person’s experiences and their environment can essentially change their genes, stress being a leading source... As humans, we tend to make our own “monsters” then end up fearing them for what they show about ourselves. I think the question humans must always remind each other of is this – how do you destroy a monster without becoming one in the process? Severe circumstances may make killing seem like the only answer, but we must remember that by trying to play the hero we only turn ourselves into the bigger villain.”

I was impressed that this student, and many others, not only used the required sources, but also dove into other avenues of information to back up their claims. Below, I have included the citations this student used for their essay. Which, in my opinion, was quite extensive.

- Bridges, Elizabeth. "Survival of the White, Male, CisHeteros: JRoth's Fantasyland – A Dialogue." *The Uncanny Valley*. N.p., 01 June 2017. Web. 6 Dec. 2018.
- Dittmann, Melissa. "What Makes Good People Do Bad Things?" *American Psychological Association*. American Psychological Association, 2004. Web. 6 Dec. 2018.
- Elizabeth. "The 100 Season 3 Retrospective Part 3: Themes." *The Fandomentals*. The Fandomentals, 30 Aug. 2018. Web. 6 Dec. 2018.
- Ellis, Rowan. "TV and Classic Literature: Is 'The 100' like 'Lord of the Flies'?" *Bitch Flicks*. N.p., 27 Oct. 2015. Web. 6 Dec. 2018.
- Gabbatiss, Josh. "Nasty, Brutish and Short: Are Humans DNA-Wired to Kill?" *Scientific American*. N.p., 19 July 2017. Web. 6 Dec. 2018.
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- Jacobs, Tom. "Why Americans Will Never Give Up Their Guns." *Pacific Standard*. Pacific Standard, 08 June 2017. Web. 6 Dec. 2018.
- Lourenco, Frederico and B J Casey. "Adjusting behavior to changing environmental demands with development" *Neuroscience and biobehavioral reviews* vol. 37,9 Pt B (2013): 223342. 6 Dec. 2018.
- Mcleod, Saul. "The Milgram Experiment." *Simply Psychology*. Simply Psychology, 05 Feb. 2017. Web. 8 Dec. 2018.
- Nuwer, Rachel. "Future - What If All Guns Disappeared?" *BBC News*. BBC, 18 Apr. 2018. Web. 9 Dec. 2018.

In addition, this student seemed to weave the various subtle tones and rhetorical techniques into their piece to educate as well as persuade their reader. Specifically, the student

shifted between more research-heavy informative explanations, to more opinionated emotional critique depending on the points they were attempting to make.

I did feel that this student went above and beyond what was expected of them and when asked, they stated that they were just excited to learn more about the subject matter. But this student was not alone in their extra efforts. To my surprise, during my one-on-one conferences with students where we discussed the progress of their final projects, the majority of the students seemed excited to finish their papers. The general consensus was that they felt empowered because of their ability to relate *I Am Legend* with any arguments or discourses they found interesting. The freedom to explore topics of interest to them with the grounding of the genre of study seemed to be a successful and stimulating combination for student engagement and advancement.

For more context, I have included the description of the final paper below:

Intertextuality and Culture Inquiry Paper:

Students will be asked to produce a final writing project that is both a critical evaluation of the novel “I am Legend” in comparison to an intertextual work of their choosing and an argument about how the student’s chosen work elevates, deteriorates, or mirror’s the rhetoric, argument, and form of the assigned novel. In this assignment, students will be required to dissect the cultural relevancies discussed in “I am Legend,” requiring a rhetorical purpose, specific audience, and supported by a variety of supporting research previously discussed and presented in class. Minimum length: 2000 words.

Student	Sample 2 to Final Paper Improvement	
Student 1	S	Again, this student is improving. This specific student made many revisions to both their Sample 2 assignment and their Final paper. They had said that they didn't feel comfortable with writing before the class began. But, in analyzing the final paper, the student made great strides throughout the semester and was able to make clear and concise arguments.
Student 2	V	Continued improvement. Student was able to combine different sources and arguments to create a well-written and cohesive argument.
Student 3	S	Slight improvement from the Sample 1 assignment. There was a clear argument and drew interesting connections to various texts and concepts. Slightly sloppy in terms of proof-reading, but overall, an improvement over the semester.
Student 4	S	After a steep decline in progress from Sample 1 to Sample 2 assignment, I was pleasantly surprised that the student was able to regain their footing. The final paper was much more thought out than Sample 2 assignment and seemed to draw more complex conclusions about the subject matter.
Key: V: Improved Vastly S: Improved Slightly N: Regressed Slightly R: Regressed Vastly		

Critical Reflection

In her book, Bell Hooks states that “to educate as a practice of freedom is a way of teaching that anyone can learn. That learning process comes easiest to those of us who teach who also believe that there is an aspect of our vocation that is sacred; who believe that our work is not merely to share information but to share in the intellectual and spiritual growth of our students” (Hooks, 13). After teaching this class and a handful of others, I agree with this sentiment full-heartedly. In asking for student engagement, instructors must also engage ourselves. Writing the Undead was a fun and informative class with amazing learning experiences because of the willingness of my students to dive into the concepts and the excitement of myself towards their education.

In many aspects of my research on engagement of student understanding and improvement in the first-year composition classroom, my initial hypotheses were on the right track. The overall engagement of my students, and the students of the previously cited instructors that employed popular culture pedagogy, were very high. Students in my class were vocal in their excitement about the topics and were very open in discussions. They expressed how they would have been less engaged or refused to read the materials at all if it were not for the theme of the course.

Yet, looking towards future courses, there are a few aspects of the course structure and application that I would amend. During the teaching of this course, I had the opportunity to watch a few of my peers’ classes and came to a few conclusions about my course in comparison to theirs. The class that I visited was that of an instructor whose class was strictly focused on “writing about writing.” The students worked out of a textbook where they would analyze and dissect texts that were directly correlated or related to the discussion of rhetoric and composition.

This led to slightly different discussions from the ones I had experienced in my class. The students, although not quite as enthusiastic about the subject matter, were very well-versed in rhetorical terminology and concepts. Unlike my students, they were able to speak about the text from a slightly more academic voice because they had the tools to pull from. This sparked an idea for improvement in my course creation in the future.

I do believe that pop culture, creative writing, and rhetoric can exist in the same classroom and can help students to connect more enthusiastically with the material, but I found that the balance between them is the most important ingredient. In my class, my first experience in teaching a first-year composition course, I ultimately concluded that I leaned a bit too heavily on the framework of the class. Fortunately, I had the opportunity to teach the same course the following semester and was able to make slight changes to the syllabus and class structure. Although the students were different, I was able to implement a few changes that seemed to make a big impact. Most notable was the addition of the rhetorical text, *Understanding Rhetoric, A Graphic Guide to Writing*, a text book that is written and illustrated like a comic book. I supplemented each unread reading with a short chapter from this book as a way to directly focus the students' attention on specific rhetorical situations or techniques such as the understanding of rhetorical triangle. Even though the text book did seem a bit "kiddy" or simple at times, I felt that it did add a better understanding of rhetorical elements and the terminology or language of those elements so that the students could more clearly express what they did or didn't need more help understanding.

For example, during one class, I separated the students in half. One side were humans that hated vampires and wanted them eradicated. The other side were vampires who didn't want to die. I asked each of the groups to come up with three arguments—one for pathos, one for

logos, and one for ethos— that they felt were the most effective in persuading their audience, the other side of class, to change their mind. Because of the reading in *A Graphic Guide to Writing*, the students were well-equipped in understanding how to construct the three arguments differently. This was by far one of the most exciting and heavily participation-heavy classes that I have ever taught.

After reviewing the student work, progression, and grasp of concepts taught in both of the classes, as well as a critical reflection on student engagement, I believe that supplying the class with a solid and consistent foundation in both the genre of focus *as well as* classic rhetorical situations and elements, provides the best opportunity for success, growth, and willingness to participate and exceed expectations. Teaching these courses was not only a great learning experience for my students but for myself as well. It was because of the flexibility of the institution, the genre of study, and the tenacity of my students that I was able to have such a wonderful and informative first year of teaching at a university level.

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