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Good People Speaking Well: Teaching Character Education in First-Year Writing

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In the United States, first-year writing (FYW) is an almost universal requirement for college graduation.[1] Since its introduction in the late 1800s, the course has been committed to the project of helping students become college-level thinkers and communicators (Stewart; Douglas). Universities require FYW based on the premise that students who can communicate effectively will also contribute to society in meaningful ways: as effective rhetoricians, community-minded citizens, social justice activists, cultural critics, productive collaborators, or simply eloquently self-actualized people.

Yet today, many writing studies scholars fear that the ideals of FYW have not been realized. American universities have been teaching FYW for 140 years, but in contemporary social groups of all sizes and kinds, we see communication that is "intolerant and irrational, venomous and violent, divisive and dishonest" (Duffy 9). We find people who cannot constructively engage with strangers or those who disagree with them, people who do not want to learn from each other, and people who cannot "explore ambiguities, express doubt, or admit error" (Duffy 8). This alarm has been sounded before. In 1946, Carrol Brooks Ellis fretted that teachers of public speaking had neglected to help students recognize their moral and ethical responsibilities. "In short," he said, "we have failed to emphasize a speaker as a 'good man'" (85). But the condition of contemporary public

[1] At Brigham Young University (BYU), students can fulfill this requirement through advanced placement test scores or credit transferred from another university. Nevertheless, nearly 70% of BYU student enroll in first-year writing.

discourse warrants special worry for those, like me, who study and teach writing. John Duffy argues that the failure of FYW to produce civility in the public square can be attributed to a lack of virtue ethics in first-year writing. Without attention to virtue and character development, FYW simply cannot produce speakers who are also good people.

It is befuddling that this lack of attention to virtue and character has been true even of FYW at Brigham Young University (BYU) where I teach. While Lamb et al. argue that character is only rarely referenced at most universities (Lamb, Dykhuis, Mendonça, and Jayawickreme), the opposite is true at BYU, the flagship university of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (hereafter, "the Church") education system. BYU's mission statement explicitly identifies developing character as one of the aims of a BYU education—along with strengthening spirituality, enlarging intellect, and preparing students for a lifetime of learning and service in their families, church congregations, communities, and workplaces. Yet to date, we who lead and teach FYW have not done enough to include character education in this required course.

This paper describes how BYU's team of writing program administrators, of which I am a member, is changing that. The paper examines the opportunities and challenges we faced in two areas while creating a new course that teaches character through and within FYW. First, I discuss the challenge and opportunity of creating a FYW curriculum that honors our field's traditions and disciplinary knowledge while explicitly drawing on character-development and religious education. Second, I explain the challenge and opportunity of building enthusiasm for teaching such a course. As VanderWeele and Hinton point out, for a course to meet the "proper scope of education for flourishing,"

teachers must be both willing to engage in character-developing education and must have the skills and capacities, time, training, and resources to implement this kind of education (4). This paper describes how we have tried to enroll teachers in our new vision for FYW and how we continue to support them.

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate that character education is both needed in FYW and a natural fit for the course. As we were redesigning our course, BYU's administration initiated a campus-wide effort to increase the character developing and spiritually strengthening nature of every course at BYU. It is impossible to overstate how helpful that institutional push was in motivating and making possible the project we describe in this paper. But even without the kairotic institutional backing we enjoyed, our model offers hope for every writing program administrator who is interested in character education.

THE CHALLENGE AND OPPORTUNITY OF CREATING A FYW PEDAGOGY

Our learning objective for a new FYW course at BYU was two-fold: (1) teach students the knowledge and skills of effective communicators and (2) help them develop virtues that will spur them to use those skills toward good ends. We also wanted our course to meet the expectations of our writing studies colleagues, adhere to the standards for FYW established by our professional organizations, and align with current scholarship on character and religious education. Our challenge was to weave these strands into a coherent 16-week course that could be taught by a variety of faculty—from graduate student instructors to tenured professors.

To make our course recognizable as FYW, we carefully studied the Council of Writing Program Administrators' outcome statement for FYW (WPA). We surveyed the motley approaches to teaching FYW that are used in U.S. universities, looking for overlaps between our goals and the outcomes of these various pedagogical approaches (Tate, Rupiper Taggart, Schick, and Hessler). Richard Fulkerson identifies three main pedagogical approaches to teaching—critical and cultural, expressivist, and rhetorical— based on how teachers answer these questions: What makes writing good? How do written texts come into existence? How does one teach college students effectively? And how does one know the answer to these questions?

In some way, each of these strands matches our goals. Each promotes writing as a good practice, as something that ostensibly contributes to individual or collective human flourishing. And because each FYW pedagogy advocates for an aesthetic, political, social, or spiritual value, all could qualify as "values education" using Arthur, Kristjánsson, Harrison, Sanderse, and Wright's formulation of that term. In many cases, FYW also qualifies as Arthur et al.'s "moral education." Yet we did not find any approach that fit their requirements for "character education": education that is "concerned with the cultivation of positive character traits called 'virtues'" (20).

For example, the critical and cultural studies strand of pedagogy focuses on values related to social justice, emphasizing critical theories, interdisciplinarity, collaboration, and, often, political activism (Tate et al.). Critical pedagogues judge writing as good if it unmasks power; critically engages cultural artifacts; and is produced through collaborating with others, including marginalized populations and decentering the teacher's authority.

Critical pedagogy foregrounds students' agency as citizens but is not explicitly concerned with cultivating positive character traits.

In contrast, expressivist pedagogy claims as its highest value the writer's "imaginative, psychological, social, and spiritual development" (Tate et al. 113). But because expressivism's primary goal is to help a writer discover and develop their authentic voice, little is done to direct the writer's moral development. In fact, the process for producing expressivist writing intentionally decenters the teacher's authority, making it difficult for teachers to propose normative values and ideals.

Even rhetorical strands of pedagogy, which situate their roots in ancient rhetoric, typically sideline Aristotle's ideas about virtue in favor of formal argumentation, inartistic and artistic appeals, and communication's social and political functions. Rhetorical education in FYW often glosses over both Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and Quintilian's later assertions that communicators will only be effective when they are good. In Quintilian's view, a bad man cannot be a consummate orator because he lacks "discernment and prudence," pays "an inordinate attention to an estate," and a "too anxious pursuit of wealth," "assert[s] without modesty, and maintain[s] their assertions without shame." In Quintilian's formulation, a person could "never be a bad man and a perfect orator" (Book 12 Chapter 1). The unfavorable opinion many people hold of rhetoric today—as deceptive, manipulative, or empty speech—is evidence that rhetorical education has failed to maintain this bond between character, virtue, and eloquence.

In short, though FWY is always obliquely about character education, we did not find explicit character education in any existing model of FYW. We did find a FYW pedagogy that

meets the character education definition developed by the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues: "forward-looking, grounded in progressive politics, concerned with both individual and societal change, aims at a change of emotional make-up, uses a variety of methods geared towards the development of *phronesis,* and promotes specific universal moral values and virtues" (Arthur et al. 113). This is the educational experience we wanted to create for our students.

We determined that we would adapt a rhetorical approach to composition pedagogy that recovers Aristotle's emphasis on virtue. Our rhetorical approach to FYW is distinct and different from existing rhetorical pedagogies in three ways: (1) becoming virtuous is the heart of the curriculum, (2) we teach argument as a method of virtuous and peacemaking communication connected to the religious concept of atonement, and (3) we teach reflection as an academic and moral practice. In doing this, we sought to be true to our disciplinary heritage and to our religious heritage. Anchoring the course in the discipline of rhetoric allows us to highlight the centrality of Aristotle to both rhetorical and character education. Incorporating our religious beliefs allows us to highlight the importance of virtue in the teachings of Jesus Christ. Though many BYU faculty members have always included religious elements in their teaching—beginning class with prayer, assigning scriptures and texts authored by Church leaders, and referencing Church teachings and culture during lessons—our new FYW course moves religion from pedagogical add-ons into the core curriculum. Our FYW course is transparent about the affinities between our academic and religious roots.

Deciding on this pedagogical approach was just the first challenge we faced. We also had to find ways to deliver this curriculum in the nearly 300 sections of FYW we teach every year. If we wanted a consistent student experience across all sections, we needed a common textbook that supported our goals. This was our second and more difficult hurdle. Initially we hoped to find an existing textbook, so we studied the work of rhetoric and composition scholars who have approached rhetoric through the lens of peacemaking, religious traditions, and ethical frameworks. We studied the work of John Duffy, Krista Ratcliffe, Barry Kroll, Richard Gibson and James Beitler, Stephen Toulmin, and Mike Caulfield. We also studied the scholarship on intellectual virtues and character education. We read Jason Baehr, Phillip Dow, Arthur et al., and Brant, Brooks, and Lamb. Each book shaped our thinking, but none offered the combination of rhetorical education, religious education, and character education we sought. Without a textbook that made virtue and rhetoric equally vital concerns, we worried our students would see rhetoric as the "real" curriculum and character development as simply a nice addition. To meet this challenge, we assembled a team of full-time and experienced adjunct faculty members to write a textbook that expresses the distinct features of our new FYW pedagogy.

A commitment to becoming virtuous communicators: The resulting textbook contains five sections that represent our learning objectives for students. Each section title begins with the word "becoming" because *becoming* good people is a central to our theology. An article of faith for members of the Church states that "we believe in being honest, chaste, virtuous, and in doing good to all men" ("Articles"). Pairing action ("doing good") with character (being "honest, chase, virtuous") expresses the work of a follower of

Jesus Christ. Dallin H. Oaks, current president of the Church, explained that "in contrast to institutions of the world, which teach us to *know* something, the gospel of Jesus Christ challenges us to *become* something." Following this principle, the sections of our textbook are titled:

- Becoming an ethical and charitable communicator
- Becoming a lifelong learner
- Becoming a purposeful and versatile writer
- Becoming a curious and careful researcher
- Becoming a stylish and intentional composer

Each section has a preface that introduces virtues associated with the section's topic. For example, the preface to section one introduces students to the moral virtues of humility and empathy and the intellectual virtue of openness. The preface to the second section introduces students to the intellectual virtues of perseverance and autonomy and the moral virtues of self-discipline. We hope that consistently framing rhetorical education as character education helps our students develop virtue literacy and the desire to actively commit to living virtuously (Moulin-Stozek and Metcalfe).

A commitment to argument as peacemaking: We want students to see argument as a communication strategy that allows people get along with each other and get things done in the world. Argument enables cooperation and the discovery of shared truth; as such, argument is the engine of flourishing societies. From our religious perspective, we see the ability to argue without becoming contentious as the hallmark of Christian discipleship (Nelson). Yet like most people, our students often view argument as a

contentious event, a battle or war that threatens rather than builds harmonious relationships. Changing this orientation toward argument is a priority of our new curriculum. Instead of thinking about argument as war, we ask students to consider argument as a form of atonement. Latter-day Saint theology posits atonement as the work Christ did to reconcile humans to God, allowing them to have a relationship with divinity. We deliberately chose this Christian idea because we believe, with Moulin-Stozek and Metcalfe, that religious concepts can contribute to students' understanding of virtue. Presenting argument as a method for achieving atonement helps students see that virtuous argument can lead to reconciliation, righteous advocacy, unity, and collective flourishing. Virtuous argument is peacemaking.

Our new textbook teaches students that peacemaking arguments begin in inquiry. Traditionally, students have been taught that an argument begins with a claim that they seek to back with evidence. Our model, which we borrow from Mike Caufield, inverts this sequence by insisting that students delay a claim until they have sufficient evidence to make that claim. As Caulfield points out, this inversion of the traditional school-based argument is the normal sequence of real-world arguments. In the real world, people experience or encounter information and then make claims about it. Caulfield calls for arguers to slow down their rush to a claim by acknowledging that their understanding is imperfect and their perspective incomplete. According to Caulfield, ethical and effective arguers engage in deep, intentional, and focused inquiry and seek out reliable and credible sources of information. Only when arguers thoroughly understand an issue can they begin to think about a claim and the warrant that links the evidence they've discovered to the

claim they want to make. Importantly, ethical and effective arguers rely only on warrants that reasonable people will agree with and that they themselves are willing to be bound by. We illustrate this model of argument using a graphic adapted from Caulfield's work (see figure 1).

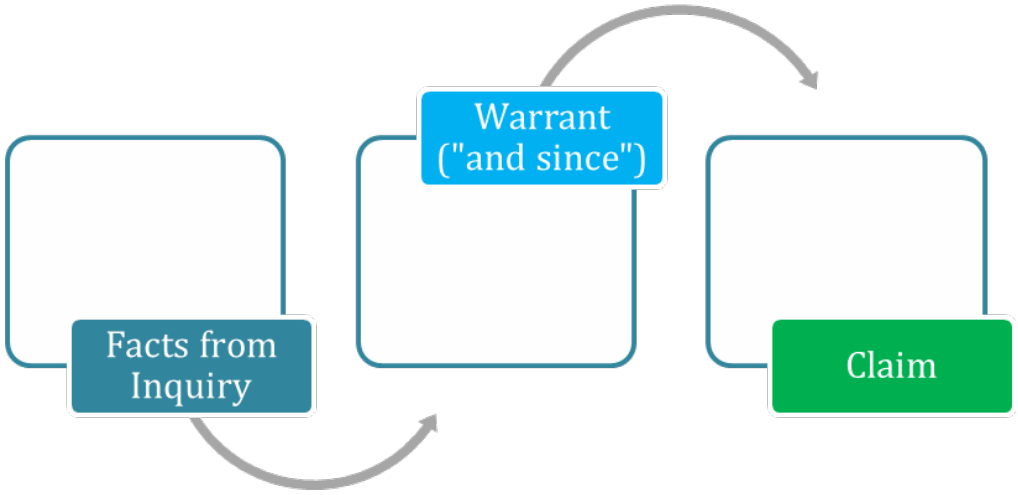

Fig. 1. Argument Model

Caulfield focuses on skills like information literacy rather than virtues, but his model implicitly relies on intellectual virtues like curiosity, carefulness, thoroughness, and humility. In our textbook, we make those virtues explicit. Our textbook encourages students to commit to developing the necessary humility, openness, thoroughness, fairness, and empathy to argue in an effective, ethical, and virtuous manner. We ask them to make a virtuous and peacemaking orientation toward argument their "settled disposition" rather than a "fleeting inclination" (Lamb, Brant, and Brooks 120).

A commitment to reflection as an academic and moral practice. Abundant research shows the value of reflection for learning and, especially, for learning to write. Reflection helps students understand their writing process and appreciate their writing

development (Gorlewski and Greene), plan and problem solve (Reid), learn from their writing experiences and construct a writing identity (Whitney, McCracken, and Washell), improve their performance (Bransford, Brown, and Cocking), develop self-regulation (Chaterdon), and transfer their writing skills and knowledge to new contexts (Taczak and Robertson).

Reflective practice is equally important to character development. Through a habit of structured reflection, students can make their experiences productive toward good character. When students rehearse their experiences and evaluate them in the light of the virtues they or others used, or failed to use, they discover the virtues they want to develop or improve (Lamb, Brant, and Brooks). Reflection, therefore, is vital to the development of *phronesis*, which Aristotle defined as the capacity to discern morally salient features of a situation and determine the best course of action.

To help students develop a reflective disposition, we use a structured reflective heuristic borrowed from Borton. We teach students that reflection involves thinking cognitively, thinking metacognitively, and thinking actively (see figure 2). Reflection requires a learner to toggle back and forth between thinking about and articulating what they know or have experienced (cognition); evaluating why, how, or in what ways their knowledge/experience matters to them (metacognition); and deciding what they want to do or become because of what they've learned or experienced (action). We teach them that this combination of cognition, metacognition, and action will allow them to apply their knowledge and skills in new contexts. More importantly, we teach that reflection helps them develop the practical wisdom that guides virtuous living.

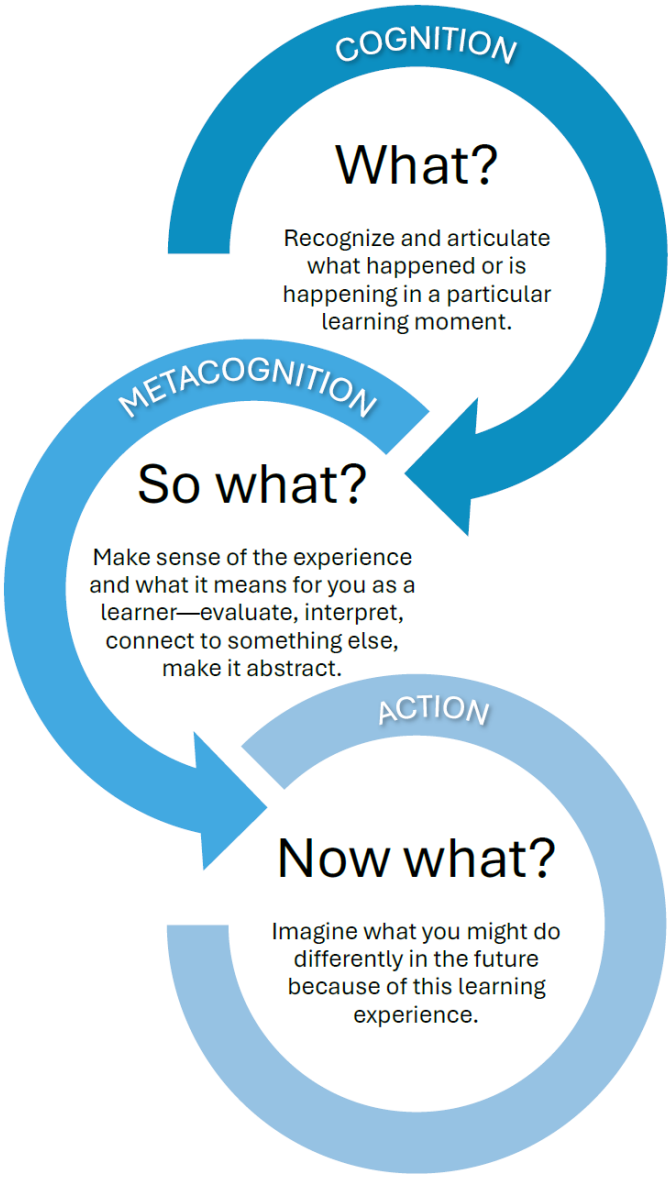

Fig. 2. Reflection model

To reinforce reflection, we use reflective language in classroom instruction, assign reflective writing, and make reflection a regular part of classroom activities. For example, “Turn to a partner and talk about the last time you took a stance on something. Now think metacognitively. What virtues did you use (or not use) in trying to persuade someone of

your claim?" By giving students multiple opportunities to reflect, we hope our students see reflective practice as normal and natural part of living.

Combined, the two primary prongs of our pedagogy—argument and reflection—provide an opportunity for assessing character development. Students' written arguments, which we call advocacy papers, demonstrate their ability, or inability, to engage in sincere inquiry as they use an argument-as-atonement model for making claims. We can also see evidence of character development as we conference with them throughout the advocacy paper writing process. The reflective writing we assign allows students to self-report their progress in developing virtuous dispositions. And reflecting together during class discussions allows peers to act as "character friends" who can comment on each other's use of virtues and development of character (Arthur et al. 112). Arthur et al. caution that measuring moral virtue is always "messy," but the instruments of argument and reflection we use in our course at least offer the possibility of triangulation (119).

THE CHALLENGE AND OPPORTUNITY OF ENROLLING FACULTY IN OUR VISION

Our second challenge was persuading full-time faculty, adjunct faculty, and graduate student instructors who teach first-year writing to catch our vision for the new course. In some ways, our revised FYW course was an easy sell at BYU. Not only does our institutional mission statement call for character development, but as noted above, our current administration has reemphasized its importance. Additionally, all BYU faculty belong to the Church and thus share common beliefs about education and its role in promoting individual and collective flourishing. In scripture unique to the Church, Latter-day Saints are instructed to learn and teach about "things both in heaven and in the earth,

and under the earth; things which have been, things which are at home, things which are abroad; the wars and the perplexities of the nations, the knowledge of countries and of kingdoms." The purpose of this broad educational endeavor is collective wellbeing—"that all may be edified of all" and "that every [person] may have an equal privilege" (Doctrine & Covenants 88). In other words, for Latter-day Saints, education has always been bound up with flourishing— the "state in which all aspects of life are good, including the contexts [families, neighborhoods, and communities] in which that person lives" (VanderWeele and Lomas 38).

Surprisingly, we still encountered resistance to the new curriculum from some instructors—though not where we expected to find it. Research shows that graduate student instructors often resist learning new pedagogical approaches and theories (Hesse), but our graduate students quickly warmed to the new curriculum. We encountered more resistance from adjunct faculty, some of whom have taught FYW for decades. Additionally, some full-time faculty expressed concern that the course was too prescriptively narrow and didn't allow them the freedom to include their own research interests in the curriculum.

To overcome this resistance, we concentrated on giving our faculty the skills and capacities, training, and resources they need to teach character education in FYW (VanderWeele and Lomas). First, we offered training in information literacy, reflective writing pedagogy, and virtues education. For adjunct faculty, these training sessions were optional, but we incentivized attendance by providing lunch or a small stipend. We also invited experts in information literacy, virtue education, and reflection to campus to deliver

lectures and teach workshops for all faculty and, in some cases, students. Again, we invite, but do not mandate, full-time and adjunct faculty attendance. Nevertheless, we've been pleasantly surprised by the number of faculty members who choose to participate. Some of our adjunct faculty have also started book clubs to read books about information literacy and virtue education, and we buy books for all participants. Finally, we share lesson plans and other teaching materials and have created a searchable online library of these resources. To generate enthusiasm for our curricular projects, we invited all faculty to participate in both the creation of the library and in writing our new textbook.

To date, these efforts have softened faculty members' attitudes toward teaching character education in to first-year writing. However, we concede that the challenge of time remains an obstacle to our faculty fully embracing the new curriculum. When pressed for time, all teachers fall back to familiar lessons and teaching strategies. This may be especially true of adjunct faculty who are not compensated for curriculum development. Without administrative support for better compensation or reduced teaching loads, time will continue to be a hurdle to faculty fully embracing character development.

CONCLUSION

This paper has outlined an approach to FYW that responds to concerns about the divisive and contentious nature of American public discourse. Because FYW is a required course that reaches almost all first-year students at American universities, it has the potential to be a powerful tool in reshaping communication patterns and fostering more productive modes of public deliberation. I have argued that pairing writing pedagogy with character education is an effective way to fulfill the potential of FYW. The curricular model I

have presented uses rhetorical theory as its foundation and reclaims the idea of virtue that ancient rhetoricians saw as inherently linked to good communication. The course's pedagogical cornerstones of argumentation and reflection complement the character education that is at heart of the curriculum. While this model was developed at a religious institution that is friendly to character education, I hope this discussion inspires other teachers to reconsider FYW as a site for teaching virtue.

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