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Using Dystopian Texts to Promote Social Responsibility in the Composition Classroom

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Young Adult Literature
in the Composition
Classroom

Essays on Practical Application

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Using Dystopian Texts to Promote Social Responsibility in the Composition Classroom

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Since the Colonial period, educational institutions in the United States have been tasked with developing character as well as academic skill. While in earlier epochs such character education would have been explicitly tied to morality as defined within Christian contexts, today's character education takes on a more secular form, focusing on developing skills related to social responsibility. By definition, social responsibility is "a personal investment in the well-being of people and the planet" (Berman 15). Despite the fact that many feel that public schools and universities are ideal sites for this type of training, research has found that instructors are often reluctant to discuss controversial issues within their classrooms because of the potential negative ramifications. A recent study found that only "11% of students reported spending time in their classes on 'problems facing the country today'" (Wolk 667). Further research has found that such issues "receive little attention in schools because in the culture of schooling, and the culture of society, many controversial topics and issues are taboo" (Evans, Avery, and Pederson 295). Ultimately, these cultural taboos "impose severe disabilities on teaching and thinking," impacting the decisions instructors make concerning course content and classroom management (Evans, Avery, and Pederson 295). Resistance—perceived or real—from students, parents, or administrators result in curricula that are divorced from contemporary events pertaining to social inequality. As a result of this self-censorship, students exit the educational sphere ill prepared to be active citizens of the world.

When instructors do go against the societal grain and merge such subject matter into their courses, some common issues surface. Brian K. Payne and Randy R. Gainey describe two likely scenarios that instructors will be faced with when controversial topics are at the center of classroom discussion: "(a) a small number of students may want to voice their opinions at the expense of excluding other students, or (b) all of the students may simply avoid eye contact and hope the professor will not make them talk about their ideas" (55). To further complicate the situation, other factors can also impact how likely a class is to engage in critical thinking practices surrounding social topics. Payne and Gainey explain that various "gender and demographic differences" may "affect an individual's beliefs and attitudes toward many controversial issues," as well as their willingness to openly discuss their views (55).

Despite these difficulties, studies have found that there are numerous benefits to crafting a course that forces students to engage in such critical inquiry. Research finds that the study of controversial topics, if discussed within an open and supportive classroom environment, promotes "increased political interest and civic tolerance and decreased dogmatism" (Evans, Avery, and Pederson 297). In "Teaching Supercharged Subjects," David Pace, an Associate Professor in the History Department at Indiana University, discussed a challenging course he taught on "The Dawn of the Atomic Age." Throughout many of his first attempts at teaching this course, he found that students quickly "began to assume uncharacteristically extreme positions, and conflicts within the class threatened to poison interactions for the remainder of the course" (Pace 42). Pace was further troubled by the way the students' unwavering views affected him as a teacher. He writes, "the extreme nature of many students' comments pushed my 'buttons,' and the emotional and intellectual chaos of the argument made me less effective as an agent of critical thinking" (Pace 42). Ultimately he was able to restructure the class so that it produced more favorable results, and he highlights ten strategies that ultimately worked to produce a more productive classroom atmosphere. Some of these strategies include: providing students with the necessary skills to engage with the debate (e.g., analyzing a question from multiple perspectives, supporting an argument with research); setting the foundation for the controversial issue and controlling the instructional pace (e.g., exposing students to a controversial topic slowly and incrementally); and managing the classroom dynamic and conversation (e.g., ensuring the conversation stems from the students but intervening as necessary and making sure that logic rather than emotion motivates arguments) (Pace 43–45).

Other best practices for tackling tricky topics within classroom study include creating an inquiry unit where the teacher begins with a question, or set of questions, that connect the various topics of discussion and textual

analysis (Wolk 666). Such an approach allows the overarching thematic focus of the class, more so than the individual topics of conflict, to be the foundation to build upon. This umbrella places various debates in dialogue with one another and broadens the conversation, while also helping to prevent students from disengaging if one specific topic is not appealing to them. Another crucial component to crafting a successful course that encourages social responsibility is text selection. Payne and Gainey encourage instructors to select texts that engage students in critical thinking about social issues because they provide a specific context in which to explore a larger social critique (57). This is where fictional narratives—particularly young adult literature (YAL) following in the utopian and dystopian tradition—can be extremely useful.

Discussing novels in particular, Carrie Hintz and Elaine Ostry argue that dystopian "literature encourages people to view their society with a critical eye, sensitizing or predisposing them to political action" (7). They suggest that "exposure to these types of texts can lead young readers to see inequality in their own communities and countries" (Hintz and Ostry 8). Scholars such as Jacqueline N. Glasgow encourage utilizing dystopian novels in social justice units. She argues that "social justice education has the potential to prepare citizens who are sophisticated in their understanding of diversity and group interaction, able to critically evaluate social institutions, and committed to working democratically with diverse others" (54). Similarly, Steven Wolk believes that reading dystopian novels allows "students to question the world we have and envision a better world we could have" because these texts "offer unique opportunities to teach these habits of mind" (668). Although these stories are often set in the future, usually in post-apocalyptic settings, Wolk argues that "thematically they are really about the present" (668).

This essay discusses the successes and challenges of teaching a particular cross-curricular composition course that focused on controversial issues appearing in scientific research and dystopian literature. The course capitalized on student interests (e.g., the popularity of YA dystopian novels and media) and studied narratives that wrestle with ethical concerns surrounding the idea of progress (societal achievements, technological advancement, scientific discoveries, and so forth). Contemporary debates and specific issues addressed throughout this course included cloning, stem cell research, black market organ transplants, human trafficking, surveillance technology, euthanasia, and capital punishment. In alignment with research concerning best practices in teaching social responsibility topics, this course was centered on a set of inquiry questions that stretched across all units, texts, discussions, and writing assignments. It utilized narratives as the site of inquiry—as the safe space in which to wrestle with these controversial issues. In this class students analyzed various fictional dystopian texts (novels, film, and television)

that critique the above-mentioned issues, and class discussion revolved around the following questions: what do we do when human survival and societal progress come at extreme costs, and how might such advancements question our faith in humanity? The theme of indebted bodies—bodies created by technology, dependent on technology, governed by technology, or punished by technology—was present in all of the literary and media texts students covered (see Figure 1). The young adult novels, in particular, often served as gateway or anchor texts, priming the analysis of canonical literature (read in entirety or in excerpts), media, and nonfiction texts.

An Interdisciplinary Composition Course: Studying Science, Law, Medicine and Literature

This course was designed as a general education composition course for undergraduate students. The normal composition of such a class is 18–21 students, primarily non-English majors of freshman to junior status. The course objectives were designed so that by the end of the semester students would be able to demonstrate the following skills:

1. Develop skills in critical reading, viewing, and listening for understanding and evaluating culturally diverse course materials and for becoming more discerning reader/viewer/listener.
2. Engage in reading and writing experiences about literature in order to demonstrate an increased understanding or an appreciation for social, cultural, intellectual, and aesthetic ideas and their discovery.
3. Understand the relationship that narratives have to one another (despite differences in media or genre) and to the cultural/social/historical milieu in which they are created, produced, and consumed.
4. Showcase skills and best practices for analyzing various genres and composing arguments about their purpose, value, and functionality.
5. Recognize multiple perspectives and be able to logically integrate, expand on, and/or counter them when formulating one's own argument.
6. Develop research skills, including effective use of source materials and the principles of MLA documentation, as well as the abilities to annotate, paraphrase, summarize, quote, and synthesize written material accurately and ethically.
7. Apply research from outside disciplines (e.g., science, law, ethics) to the study of literature, film, television, and other artifacts from popular culture.

8. Demonstrate mastery of the writing/design process by creating multiple products that arrive at their final state through the stages of pre-writing/pre-planning, drafting, revising, editing, and proofreading.

9. Revise documents by participating in peer review workshops and writing conferences.

10. Work collaboratively in order to explore ideas, formulate arguments, and present findings in a scholarly fashion.

While these were the objectives articulated on the syllabus, the course also aimed to teach social responsibility—an outcome not as easily measured as those listed above.

This course was divided into three thematic units: (1) Exploring the Consequences of Technological Progress; (2) Critiquing the Changing Justice System; and (3) Ethical Debates within Science and Medicine. Each unit was further divided into sub-units focused on specific technological advances or instances of human progress. These sub-units contained textual sets where students analyzed the topic of focus within a literary work, film, and various non-fiction texts from contemporary discourse (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Course Themes & Texts

<i>Themes</i>	<i>Print Texts</i>	<i>Media Texts</i>
UNIT I. EXPLORING THE CONSEQUENCES OF TECHNOLOGICAL PROGRESS		
Human Dependence on Information Technology	M.T. Anderson's <i>Feed</i> ; Mark Baurelien's "The Dumbest Generation"; Nicholas Carr's "Is Google Making Us Stupid?"	
The Evolution of Robotics	Isaac Asimov's <i>I, Robot</i> ; Brian Aldiss's "Super Toys"	Steven Spielberg's <i>A.I. Artificial Intelligence</i>
Technology and the Human Body	Scott Westerfeld's <i>Uglies</i> ; Aldous Huxley's <i>Brave New World</i>	
UNIT II. CRITIQUING THE CHANGING JUSTICE SYSTEM		
Human Surveillance	Cory Doctorow's <i>Little Brother</i> ; Philip K. Dick's "The Minority Report"	Steven Spielberg's <i>The Minority Report</i>
Capital Punishment		Alan Parker's <i>The Life of David Gale</i>
UNIT III. ETHICAL DEBATES WITHIN SCIENCE AND MEDICINE		
Cloning and Stem Cell Research	Kazuo Ishiguro's <i>Never Let Me Go</i>	Michael Bay's <i>The Island</i>
Human Trafficking	Margaret Atwood's <i>The Handmaid's Tale</i>	Miquel Sapochnik's <i>Repo Men</i>

Making and Resisting Connections Between the Fictional Texts and Real World Problems

One theme that students studied pertained to the consequences of advanced technology. In their early readings, they were forced to entertain the arguments of academics who specifically critique their generation's dependency on technology:

We have entered the Information Age, traveled down the Information Superhighway, spawned a Knowledge Economy, undergone the Digital Revolution, converted manual workers into knowledge workers. [...] And yet, while teens and young adults have absorbed digital tools into their daily lives [...] taken more classes, built their own Web sites, enjoyed more libraries, bookstores, and museums [...] young Americans today are no more learned or skillful than their predecessors, no more knowledgeable, fluent, up-to-date, or inquisitive, except in the materials of youth culture [Baurelein 8-9].

Baurelein laments the current societal conditions: "instead of opening young American minds to the stores of civilization and science and politics, technology has contracted their horizon to themselves, to the social scene around them" (10).

Baurelein's criticisms align well with the social commentary provided in *Feed*. After only hours of being disconnected from the feed, a constant stream of information that automatically flows through people's minds, the main character, Titus, begins complaining about its disappearance through an interior monologue that showcases just how crucial he and his peers feel this technological apparatus is to their daily existence:

I missed the feed. I don't know when they first had feeds. Like maybe, fifty or a hundred years ago. Before that, they had to use their hands and their eyes. Computers were all outside the body. They carried them around outside of them, in their hands, like if you carried your lungs in a briefcase and opened it to breathe [Anderson 47].

In this course students were trained to study not only the content of the narratives but their form as well—although they were not equally skilled at both tasks.

Despite being able to easily grasp the social commentary present within these narratives, students struggled when it came to analyzing how the authors' stylistics underscored those. Both Anderson's *Feed* and Westerfeld's *Uglies* perform their social commentary about the negative effects of technology through various formal techniques. For example, both authors draw upon informal diction (the use of slang and improper syntax) to highlight the ignorance of the characters within their novels. While students understood that

the authors were mocking their main characters or, at least, depicting their lack of critical thinking and formal education, they resisted reading these characters as analogous to themselves. They did not want to see themselves in these young adult protagonists—which is abnormal for a genre that is known for its relatability—indicating that the students were hesitant to grapple with the critique about their own dependence on technology and the detrimental effects that it may produce.

Less student resistance was seen when the critiques concerning technology did not implicate them directly. Another thematic thread surfacing throughout many of the narratives studied in this course were the effects that technological advancements have on the environment. Although many narratives touch on this theme briefly, the novel that most explicitly does so is *Feed*. Throughout the novel the declining state of Earth is shown through depictions of suburbs existing under protective domes; dead seas that can only be visited when wearing protective suits; and discussions of national parks being eliminated in order to build air factories (Anderson 88, 129, 179). Anderson is clearly critiquing human waste at various points in his novel in sometimes comical and sometimes serious ways. One ridiculous scene finds the main character's mother and brother crinkling up "the disposable table" so that it can be thrown away after just one use (Anderson 129). And in a more emotional scene toward the end of the novel, the father of a dying girl makes this enraged speech about the wasteful practices of American citizens: "We Americans are interested only in the consumption of our products. We have no interest in how they were produced, or what happens to them once we discard them, once we throw them away" (Anderson 290).

This theme of waste surfaces in Aldiss's short story about artificial intelligence, "Super Toys." Consider this excerpt from a speech made by the CEO of a company who invented the first robotic child:

Though three-quarters of the overcrowded world are starving, we are lucky here to have more than enough, thanks to population control. Obesity's our problem, not malnutrition. I guess there's nobody round this table who doesn't have a [technology implant] working for him in the small intestine, a perfectly safe tape-worm that enables its host to eat up to fifty per cent more food and still keep his or her figure [195].

The various films viewed throughout the term show the consequences of human waste as only a visual display can. The most striking of these are the closing scenes of Spielberg's *A.I.*, which depicts a destroyed vision of New York City, first in ruins and later under water. The film ends with a scene two thousand years in the future—long past the end of humanity during a time in which aliens reside on Earth and humans cease to exist. In class discussion and writing activities, students easily connected the environmental critiques

made in these texts to contemporary problems such as global warming, dependence on fossil fuel, water pollution, and animal extinction.

Another theme that students connected well with was the societal critique concerning the effects of the media and celebrity culture on society. Westerfeld's YA series grounds its commentary on the current surge in cosmetic surgery and offers "an impetus for an important dialogue about beauty standards and our culture's" captivation with them (Scott and Dragoo 11). In one scene, the main character of *Uglies*, Tally, is flipping through old celebrity magazines from the "Rusty Era" (a period meant to refer to our contemporary times). Her interior monologue demonstrates how drastically she and her contemporaries have been brainwashed into believing that physical differences amount to only imperfections:

She'd never seen so many wildly different faces before. Mouths and eyes and noses of every imaginable shape, all combined insanely on people of every age. And the bodies. Some were grotesquely fat, or weirdly over muscled, or uncomfortably thin, and almost all of them had wrong, ugly proportions. But instead of being ashamed of their deformities, the people were laughing and kissing and posing, as if all the pictures had been taken at some huge party [Westerfeld 198].

This topic is broached in *Feed* also. In this novel Anderson depicts the characters as being mindless trend followers, quickly running off to change their hairstyles or self-mutilate their bodies if the current fashion trend demands it. In an interview with James Blasingame, Anderson notes that, in addition to serving as a cautionary tale about the misuse of technology, his novel was intended to scrutinize the current culture of instant gratification, aspects of herd psychology, and individuals' refusal to tackle serious societal problems (4). Although resistant to aligning themselves with the authors' commentary about their generation's dependence on technology, students were quick to apply the critiques about societal beauty standards to their own lives. Perhaps because as young adults they are heavily influenced celebrity culture and media messages concerning body image, this topic was the most selected when students had the opportunity to focus their own research on one of the course themes.

Practical Considerations for the Composition Classroom

The assessments in this class strived to show mastery of textual connections through written products involving textual analysis and interdisciplinary research. Writing instruction and tasks were scaffolded so that students developed and practiced a range of writing skills and produced a range of compositions that increased in length, difficulty, and genre variation as the course progressed. Students completed four formal writing assignments and

two impromptu writing pieces throughout this 15-week course. The first two assignments are the most traditional, while the other two highlight an attention to genre and interdisciplinary boundary blurring not always found in a composition class.

Response Journal

Students completed this ongoing project throughout the semester in order to document their careful reading and literary analysis, as well as their attentive viewing of in-class films (see Figure 2). The goal of this collection of essays was to practice writing skills and assist them in completing other course work. Therefore, students were asked to craft a 1–2 page entry for each literary work we read and each film we viewed in class. They were encouraged to use these entries during our class discussion when called upon to participate in the analysis of the narrative and to consider these documents as a form of pre-writing for larger writing projects.

Figure 2. Response Journal Criteria

Format for Responses: For each entry devoted to a print text you should include the following components:

- *Bibliographic Citation* (formatted according to MLA—see OWL Purdue's website for assistance)
- 1–2 paragraph *Summary* of the text (a brief synopsis of the story in your own words)
- 1–2 paragraph *Analysis* section (a discussion of the text's importance, overall message, and the social critique implicit within the narrative)
- *Explication* of a key passage/scene or set of related quotes/scenes (you should type out a substantial section of the text—an important paragraph or bit of dialogue—or a few linked quotations and then discuss its/their importance in relation to the text as a whole; for media texts you could also attend to filmic devices (editing, lighting, sound, setting, camera angles), discussing their effects)
- *Discussion Questions* (a list of at least 10 questions/issues that you would like to discuss in class or explore in future projects—these can be general questions but more useful might be questions that point to specific moments in the text that were interesting/confusing; it is suggested that you include potential page numbers to turn to during discussion)

Although these response journals were collected periodically throughout the semester for informal feedback on comprehension and writing development, they were ultimately assessed as a whole when they were formally submitted

for a grade. Students were then assessed based on the four major skill areas described above (summary, analysis, explication, and questioning) and in three more procedure-orientated categories (language/mechanics; bibliographical citation; and completeness).

Literary Analysis Essay

The second, rather standard, assignment given to this class was a traditional literary analysis essay. Students were asked to craft a research paper integrating outside source material to formulate an argument concerning how a controversial issue is addressed through various narratives. They were to study how these fictional texts provided a social commentary and/or critique about this issue. They were further directed to tackle the overarching questions posed by the class: (1) what ethical concerns surround the area of progress explored in their chosen narratives and (2) what these narratives suggest we do when human survival and societal progress come at extreme costs. This essay was assigned at midterm in order to ensure that students were mastering the material and key skills.

Multi-Genre Research Project

While the literary analysis essay asked students to pair texts, the final individual assessment of the course, the multi-genre research project, allowed students to focus their study on one text alone. Also, while all of the other formal assignments found students writing in traditional academic genres, this assignment allowed them to create a multimodal composition demonstrating advanced research skills through various writing items and creative pieces. In order to showcase a comprehensive understanding of one selected work/pairing, students created projects that creatively captured the literary work's overall narrative, theme, and social commentary. While a traditional essay could have met the same goals, this allowed students more freedom and flexibility when relaying their understanding of the text. This assignment encouraged students to apply their knowledge from the primary text to a variety of genres, thus creating a meta-narrative about the work. It also allowed them to showcase their understanding of how various genres (some which we studied in class) function.

From this description it might appear that students had an endless choice when it came to the construction of their final projects; however, this was not actually the case. Students were directed to choose one genre from various categories—categories specifically selected to demonstrate different skills and levels of comprehension (see Figure 3). In the end, they crafted seven unique pieces for inclusion in their projects.

Figure 3. Artifact Options for Multi-Genre Research Project

A. Newspaper Component: Compose an item that would appear in a fictional newspaper published in the hometown/area of the narrative text. This item should conform with the genre in question in terms of content, length, tone, and layout.

CHOOSE ONE OPTION FROM BELOW:

Obituary: a brief ($\frac{1}{2}$ or 1 page) blurb about the death of a character from the narrative. This could take place during the narrative or in some perceived (fictional/extended) future. Relevant details from his/her life should be present.

Letter to the Editor: a 1–2 page (double-spaced) letter taking a stand on an issue that occurred within the text. (Note: this cannot be the same issue explored in the research section below).

Advice Column: a 2-part advice column (from the character seeking advice and the fictional expert responding to it). The content of the entry posed by the narrative's character should pull from the storyline and should fit his/her personality.

Front Page Feature Story: a 2-page (double-spaced) article highlighting a key event that took place in the narrative—something that would be “front page” news. This should be fashioned after a real newspaper and should start with an attention grabbing title, important information up front, and it should address all the important W's (who, what, when, where, and why).

Personal Advertisement: a brief personal (dating) advertisement for one of the characters in the text. This should conform to genre standards/length and should fit the character's disposition.

B. Artistic Analysis Piece: Select a literary/cultural artifact that (a) is intended to capture the essence of the narrative text (i.e., a book jacket cover) or (b) that they feel represents/captures the essence of the narrative text (i.e., an unrelated text that they feel aligns well with text of study). This item can be found (but then should be cited properly) or originally crafted. Accompanying this piece should be a 1 paragraph justification of why this artifact does (or does not) fit the narrative of study.

CHOOSE ONE OPTION FROM BELOW:

Poetry (found or original)

Music Lyrics (found or original)

Product/Company Advertisement (found or original)

Book Cover/Jacket (original design or written analysis/comparison of two different versions in print)

Movie Poster (original design or analysis of published poster's design)

C. Visual Artistic Application Piece: Select a piece of visual art that they feel represents/captures the essence of the narrative text. This item can be found (but then should be cited properly) or originally crafted. Accompanying this piece should be a 1 paragraph justification of why this visual fits the narrative of study.

CHOOSE ONE OPTION FROM BELOW:

Photograph (found or original)

Sketch/Drawing (found or original)

Political Cartoon (found or original)

D. Character Insight Piece: Craft an item that provides insight into one of the characters from the text. This item will require close reading and a review of the narrative in order to select specific characteristics, behaviors, descriptions, etc. Using direct quotes/paraphrases is suggested.

CHOOSE ONE OPTION FROM BELOW:

Journal/Diary Entry: a 1–2 page (single-spaced) entry (or set of entries) from a character's perspective detailing a moment from the narrative from his/her vantage point.

Facebook Page: a mock Facebook page for a character including relevant biographical details, likes, friends, and posts. Some of this material should stem directly from the text but others can be inferred based on his/her personality.

Vanity License Plate: a realistically designed vanity license plate (use proper layout) that would represent the character's personality. Attached to this artistic piece should be a 1 paragraph justification of why this vanity plate fits his/her persona as showcased in the narrative.

Text Message/IM exchange: a 1–2 page (single-spaced) transcript for a text message or IM exchange between two characters. The contents of this narrative must be loosely based on the narrative but embellishments are allowed as long as they fit the characters participating in the conversation.

E. Informational Essay: Write in an established genre relevant to book production/review. Proper organization, tone, mechanics, and proof-reading are expected.

CHOOSE ONE OPTION FROM BELOW:

Book Review: a 1–2 page (double-spaced) evaluation essay written in the form of a book review that might be published in a newspaper, magazine, or website. Although some summary will be present, this should be balanced against critique and commentary. Be careful not to be "spoiler" heavy for the audience's sake.

Back of Book Synopsis: a 1–2 page (double-spaced) summary of the book as would be found on the rear side of a published text. This summary should serve to entice readers, encouraging them to buy/read the text, but should not spoil key plot points (such as the ending).

Compare/Contrast: a 2–3 page (double-spaced, MLA formatted) compare & contrast essay discussing the print narrative against its film counterpart. (For texts other than "Minority Report," this requires an outside film viewing of the adaptations of the works).

F. Research Component I. (Traditional Essay): Demonstrate synthesis writing and documentation skills through a traditional essay formatted according to MLA standards.

CHOOSE ONE OPTION FROM BELOW:

Author Biography: a 2–3 page essay about the author (using proper MLA citation & at least 3 scholarly sources)

Book's Reception: a 2–3 page essay discussing the book's reception/popularity/reviews (using proper MLA citation & at least 3 sources—source types will vary)

Literary Analysis: a 2–3 page essay integrating scholarly research (journal articles), analyzing a key aspect of the text (MLA citation required)

G. Research Component II. (Applied Research Item): Demonstrate the ability to research a controversial issue (one highlighted in the text) in order to provide a social commentary (similar or opposite as to that found in the text). Regardless of the option selected below, include a works cited page for this section that lists all of the sources you consulted when crafting this piece.

CHOOSE ONE OPTION FROM BELOW:

Public Service Announcement (as would be used by one side of issue in narrative): a public service announcement (print advertisement, faux billboard, commercial, video) advocating for one side of the controversial issue researched (must use material from research).

Poster/Flier/Brochure Advocating One Side of Issue: a print item meant for display/distribution that one side of the issue (supporter or opposition) would utilize to publicize his/her stance on the issue (must include material from research).

PowerPoint Presentation about Debate: a traditional PowerPoint presentation one might use if instructing a class on this controversial issue (must use material from research).

Students were assessed by scores earned in each of the seven categories listed above as well as two additional categories based on assembly and design

(which included elements related to organization/design, as well as mechanics/writing).

Group Research Presentation

While most of the assessments throughout the course were based on individual accomplishments, one assignment took on a group format. This collaborative group project allowed students to study a contemporary controversy occurring in the fields of science, law, and/or ethics—one that has infiltrated mainstream media and popular culture. This cooperative learning activity required out of class meetings, research compilation, and a formal group presentation.

Students were able to select from ten different options (see Figure 4) and they were placed into two or three person groups based on their interests. These presentations were staggered throughout the semester, aligning with the texts and topics being covered, allowing the students to become co-instructors at various moments throughout the semester.

Figure 4. Group Research Topics

- The Effects of Social Networking** (On Human Relationships/Communication)
- Artificial Intelligence** (Progress and Potential Outcomes)
- Plastic Surgery** (Effects of Media/Beauty Standards)
- Global Warming** (Human Progress and Environmental Consequences)
- The Death Penalty** (The Debates Concerning Legislation)
- The Patriot Act** (Surveillance and National Security Issues)
- Assisted Suicide/Euthanasia** (Ethical Debates and Mainstream Examples)
- Stem Cell Research** (Scientific and Political Debates)
- Cloning** (Scientific Accomplishments and Ethical Debates)
- Human Sex Trafficking** (Global Instances and Ethical Debates)

After groups were assembled, students researched their assigned topic and crafted a 15–20 minute presentation on the debates surrounding it. Students were required to use five scholarly sources, craft a visual to aid in their presentation, and complete an essay that documented their individual and group research processes. As some of these are controversial issues, students were cautioned to be objective when presenting the material. The purpose of this presentation was not that of a persuasive speech where they would take a stance on the issue but an informative one where they would objectively relay the main points of both sides of the debate without reflecting bias toward one side or the other.

Conclusions: The Successes and Challenges of Teaching an Interdisciplinary Course

Overall, the course succeeded with the desire to teach social responsibility as students did begin to show concern about the well-being of various subgroups and the planet as a whole. As research predicted, the fictional narratives were a productive space to engage with controversial topics and by the end of the term students were able to easily locate the social commentary present within narratives and apply those critiques to the world around them. The young adult novels, in particular, proved to be ideal anchor texts in sub-units that explored a range of texts and issues. However, the promise within many scholars' claims that such study would predispose students "to political action" and increase their "political interest and civic tolerance" was not always seen (Hintz and Ostry 8; Evans, Avery, and Pederson 297). While the course may ultimately impact students' political consciousness, there was no way to determine with any accuracy if this will in fact occur. Class discussion and individual writing pieces indicate that students were able to objectively critique the society of which they are a part, but these critiques did not often extend into discussions of how to resolve such cultural problems. For example, while students were quick to agree with scholars who claim that their generation is overly dependent on technology—and students even shared their worries that such dependency could decrease their intellectual capabilities—they never suggested abandoning their favorite technological gadgets, social networking sites, and so forth. However, the fact that these students were able to "evaluate social institutions" and honestly discuss "problems and injustices" is a solid starting place for continued growth (Glasgow 54; Wolk 667).

The only surprising outcome of the course was the lack of group debate it inspired. As a course grounded in supposedly controversial issues, there was an overwhelming consensus on most of the topics. The students almost always agreed with the social commentaries provided by the authors and directors of the various texts and offered very little in terms of counter arguments. Having only taught this particular course once, I am unable to determine if this was the result of the classroom dynamic, the individual personalities within the class, or if the issues or texts themselves did not cater to divergent viewpoints.

And finally, in terms of the course's cross-curricular focus: I was pleased that students were able to apply the motifs present within the fictional narratives to work being completed in other disciplines. Along the same lines, students were also able to study how these controversial topics were being discussed in other discourses and understand how that conversation—and

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the research being carried out in diverse fields—was being co-opted by the creators of fictional texts in productive ways.

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