

A TEXTBOOK FOR FD-ENG 101:
IS THIS POSSIBLE?

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Teaching writing is no stroll in the park. Of course, as a community of teachers, we know we could take out “writing” from that sentence and substitute any other discipline. Helping students discover unfamiliar worlds and guiding their interest along the path of increasing enthusiasm and expertise in a field is a lifetime’s recurring quest. But for my purpose here, I target the challenge of teaching writing and, specifically, preparing a text to guide the teaching of the new Foundations English 101 class.

Current theories of composition match well the university’s learning model. Students write for audiences beyond their teachers, they try to infer from each other’s drafts those traits that make writing work, and they learn about themselves as writers. In short, they take more responsibility for their learning and help each other in the process. As members of the FD-ENG 101 Committee, we were challenged to figure out how to take the best ideas in composition theory and meld them with the aims of the BYU-Idaho learning model to create an original textbook for the course.

Initially, I was invited to join the FD-ENG 101 committee because I had previously prepared a text for an advanced writing course. *Thinking about Thinking* was a collection of essays that modeled critical thinking. Among others, Mark Twain, Aldous Huxley, George Orwell, Samuel Scudder, and Jacob Bronowski cautioned students to explore their own egocentrism and learn how to extract ideas from the heaps of facts before them. As Scudder defined this challenge: “Facts are stupid things until brought into connection with some general law.”

I had also included in *Thinking about Thinking* LDS writers such as Gordon B. Hinckley, Dallin H. Oaks, and Jeffrey R. Holland to remind students of the roles tolerance and revelation play in the thinking process. President Hinckley expressed his hope that students at BYU would enjoy sitting “together in small groups talking with one another, even arguing over matters...in an uplifting manner.” Elder Oaks reminded his readers of the limits of the critical thinking process. He cautioned that “in the sequential relationship between reason and revelation, it is important that reason have what we call ‘the first word’ and that revelation have the ‘the last word.’” Church writers like these temper the world’s view of learning—which tends more and more to be that the only way to access knowledge is the empirical method.

So the tone for foundations English was set with the selection of *Thinking about Thinking* as a pilot text until we could more precisely

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define FD-ENG 101. The composition course would encourage students to apply critical thinking skills and explore—even debate—their personal beliefs about social issues, all within the context of an LDS worldview. And the course would attempt to bring together within the context of the BYU-Idaho learning model the best strategies for learning how to write.

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It was not long, however, before our committee realized that *Thinking about Thinking* was inadequate for the emerging course. At this point, the debate among committee members became genuinely fun and invigorating. We were, as President Hinckley had described university life, sitting together in a small group “talking with one another, even arguing over matters.” We were “scrapping” over “public issues and matters of broad interest.”

At first we met to exchange ideas about course objectives. Because we often disagreed, our discussions were challenging. The exchange of ideas was face-to-face, heart-felt, and informed. Yet I enjoyed our sounding board approach, taking turns expressing and responding to ideas. It wasn't just a debate about ideas either. We were designing a course that would be tested the following semester. I remember thinking often during those initial meetings, “Of all the directions our course could go, how does this or that fit? What prevents this assignment from becoming a part of a hodge-podge?” Our questions, as you might suspect, began to clarify our views and eventually to mold a coherent curriculum.

Two specific experiences come to mind that fanned my enthusiasm for our emerging text. First, I saw the creativity of collaboration refine the course's shape. Together we established three units, and initially I was baffled by the second unit. The assignment was: “Write about a person different from yourself in some significant way.” Given the limits of shortened semesters, I thought that analyzing a text or critiquing an argument might prove a more productive use of time than writing about a person. However, as I listened to the rationale for the assignment, my views changed. I began to see how a writing prompt, new to me, contributed to a sequence of thinking activities with a specific end in view. Here's how the committee—as a group—eventually clarified the sequence. Note how Unit Two becomes the integral link in the course's progression of assignments; this connection initially eluded me as I thought through the sequence on my own:

Unit One: Will invite you to write about an experience important to you. The assumption underlying this unit is that before a person can contribute to the discussion of significant academic, social, and political issues, he or she must be able to articulate a coherent personal position.

Unit Two: Will invite you to write about a person different from you in some significant way—his or her beliefs, values, experiences. The assumption underlying this unit is that before being able to engage in constructive communication about academic, social, and political issues, one must be able to understand and accurately report the experiences and positions of others.

Unit Three: Will invite you to reflect on an issue provoking discussion and debate in society at large. The assumption underlying this unit is that someone whose communication begins with an awareness of self (Unit One), a respect for others (Unit Two), and an informed understanding of the challenges we collectively confront is likely to address controversial issues in substantive and non-confrontational ways, thus being able to use communication to solve problems and to move policy in the direction of the common good.

Here were ideas for assignments and a logical way for sequencing them. There was craft in the design, logic in the progression, and methods grounded in the shared experience of six professionals—the Foundations committee. The structure of the class was the product of a lively exchange, lots of laughter, and some heated moments too. I believe we all saw more possibilities for a new course than we would have if we had worked by ourselves. As an aside, I want to report that I later took the second unit as described above into my classroom: these papers were the most lively and interesting I received during the semester. This was the assignment that would not have occurred to me without the debate among the committee members.

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As the course took shape, so did our new textbook. We composed introductory units to set up major assignments. We included student papers generated from our assignments and professional examples to show how skilled writers confront the same kinds of challenges our students do. We dubbed our text *I Think*. Then came the second of the experiences that fanned my fire on the project: turning *I Think* over to the students of English 452, Advanced Editing.

Years ago as I was preparing *Thinking about Thinking* for publication, I worked with a custom publisher, who cleared permissions to reprint copyrighted material and prepared a copy for me to edit. With *I Think*, I decided to work with BYU–Idaho English majors who were emphasizing professional writing. Josh Allen’s spring semester 2008 students in Advanced Editing thought of me as a client. Early in the semester, I attended their class to review sample cover designs and ideas for layout. We worked at a feverish pace to meet deadlines—the text had to be delivered to the university press by early July to have copies ready for fall semester. In a very real way, our collaboration mimicked the real world of publishing, meeting deadlines, and client expectations.

The Advanced Editing students worked to make each section of the text consistent with an overall layout. For example, the *I Think* cover was designed by one of the English 452 students, Matthew Barker, who used for the cover a photograph taken during his mission to Germany. His design was outstanding, an evocative image of an exterior cloister corridor of stone diminishing in perspective as it approached a closed door. It complemented perfectly the text's invitation to enter the book to think about the self, the other, and society.

Often by the time I finish a major piece of writing, I am sick of looking at it. But Josh's editing class took hold of the tired, battered manuscript and revived it. With the students' creative design and clear concept, the content came to life again, and I found myself eagerly leafing through the spruced-up text, anxious to edit.

Meanwhile, Jerry Phillips at the university press worked to obtain copyright clearances for professional pieces in the text. I review a bit of that journey as a last note on the fruits of cooperation. Along the way, we experienced our share of challenging hang-ups. One day Jerry called to tell me that a piece we had hoped to include in our text was prohibitively expensive. The essay, "Final Salute," nicely illustrated our second unit. The author, Jim Sheeler, had described the experiences of a marine charged with the duty of personally contacting parents whose sons or daughters had fallen in battle in Iraq. The compelling essay had recently been published in the *Rocky Mountain News* and garnered the Pulitzer Prize for feature writing. But the royalties requested were astronomical. They would raise the price of each copy of *I Think* by more than a dollar.

Here's where in-house projects have an advantage. Crestfallen, I called a managing editor at the *Rocky Mountain News* to explain our dilemma, that we could not afford the requested fee, that our text was designed for use on our campus only, and that no one would profit monetarily. "Could we possibly re-negotiate?" I asked. Promising to get back to me soon, the editor assured me he would consider our request. By day's end, I had an e-mail response. We could have the essay—a rather lengthy one at that—for a fraction of the original fee. This break gave me courage. A second Pulitzer Prize winning essay for *I Think*, this one published by the *Washington Post*, was also too expensive for our budget. But, as with "Final Salute," it illustrated effectively a particular assignment. Explaining our situation again, this time to the *Post*, I appealed to the editor. And he gave permission on the spot, gratis.

I Think is now in its second semester of use in FD-ENG 101. Student response to the text is generally positive, sometimes even enthusiastic. Often students express their admiration for the student writers whose pieces are included in the text. I think they are surprised that some of their own can produce essays worth sharing with a broad audience. It

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gives them all something to work for. And for me too. Will I continue to refine *I Think* (and continue to ferret out those pesky typos that never seem completely expunged from the text)? Yes, because as a committee we have engaged in a conversation that has broadened my views and improved my classroom. My conversations now go beyond our committee to my several colleagues now teaching FD–ENG 101. What have I learned serving on a Foundations committee? I have discovered that continued collaboration leads to a sounder text and a deeper course because the shared expertise of many allows “that all may be profited thereby.”

I have also rediscovered another boon of working in counsel with foundations colleagues. Last week I had an insightful experience relevant to my committee work, a reassurance that our efforts had been significant. My present church calling affords me an opportunity to visit often with the youth in my ward. During such an interview, I asked a young woman to read a favorite section from *For the Strength of Youth*. She chose “Education.” I listened intently as she read, impressed with the Lord’s charge “to work diligently and make sacrifices to obtain learning.” As she concluded, I asked her to back up and read the end a second time. I had heard embedded in this charge the very curriculum design we had pounded out as a Foundations committee:

Maintain an enthusiasm for learning throughout your life. Find joy in continuing to learn about yourself [our unit one: “Writing about the Self”], other people [our unit two: “Writing about the Other”], and the world around you [our unit three: “Writing about Society”].

The match of Foundations English 101 goals with the counsel in *For the Strength of Youth* seemed to me miraculous. Again I was reminded that when we work in counsels, with mutual respect and humility, the Lord leads us to ends that accord with his will and benefit his children. ∞

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