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V is for Voices: Engaging Student Interest, Sustaining Student Thinking and Writing in Today's Writing Classrooms with Fountainhead Press's V Series

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Abstract: Higher education has become increasingly concerned in recent years with its role in sustainability studies, both in the sustainability of the physical environments of its institutions and in the education of students as citizens and experts in a world facing complex environmental, economic, and social challenges. This review essay discusses the importance of sustainability-minded pedagogies in the writing classroom through an examination of [Fountainhead Press's new V \(Voices\) composition reader series](http://www.fountainheadpress.com/vseries/) [\[http://www.fountainheadpress.com/vseries/\]](http://www.fountainheadpress.com/vseries/). The essay discusses ways to integrate the V series themed readers and their assignments into a sustainability-minded writing classroom, and it concludes by suggesting important links between sustainability pedagogy and writing transfer.

A recent study conducted by GUNI (Global University Network for Innovation) has shown that while institutions of higher education around the globe are greening their facilities and operations, sustainability literacy is not rising among our graduates (Granados, Tilbury, and Wright). As James J. Farrell explains in the prelude to *The Nature of College* (2010), "students learn a lot in college, but most students aren't learning what they need to create a restorative society.... A college that wants to remain relevant to its students will teach them how to be leaders in the ecological transition of the twenty-first century" (xii-xiii). Our curricula are not preparing our students adequately to navigate the complex relationships among environment, society, economy, and technology that they face (and will face) in their roles as citizens and experts.

Institutions of higher education are in the business of educating students who will take on this century's challenges; writing classes are at the heart of that education when our students are honing their critical thinking, reading, and writing skills in our classrooms. According to the National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA), the five main societal challenges of the twenty-first century are food security, food safety, nutrition and health, bioenergy, and climate change (Beachy). Each of these challenges encompasses a complex system of relationships among the environment, the economy, society, and technology. How do we begin to educate our students about the complexities of climate change? How do we equip them to navigate the challenges and feasibilities of bioenergy? How do we prepare them to participate in policy formation and personal decision making and to be innovators who contribute to solving some of these problems? I was recently reminded of something David Orr has pointed out: these problems—of food security, food safety, nutrition and health, bioenergy, and climate change—were not created by the impoverished and the illiterate. They were created by individuals with higher education degrees who became movers and shakers in their global and local communities (Orr 7). So what are we teaching our students?

Public discourse today—and perhaps rightly so—is full of crisis rhetoric: the economic crisis, the environmental crisis, the energy crisis, not to mention concerns with healthcare and health issues, terrorism and violence, and national security. When we teach our students about writing, we are also, ideally, preparing them with the skills and knowledge to communicate, innovate, and, hopefully, move us beyond crisis. This preparation begins with an understanding of the complexities of the crises facing human communities and the complexities of those communities themselves. Addressing the issue of sustainability literacy and higher education, Farrell discusses the power of the exploratory essay to be a model for the critical inquiry our students must be prepared to engage: "Exploring links between personal life, cultural patterns, and the natural world, this essay leaves space for readers to reflect on their own experience, and invites them into a conversation about the meaning of college, and the personal and institutional possibilities of a culture of permanence" (10).

Fountainhead Press's V (Voices) series fosters this kind of exploration through readings and assignments that can help students develop critical thinking and writing skills to effectively navigate and shape our path through contemporary crises—what biologist Edward O. Wilson might call "bottlenecks." Each composition reader in the series is focused around one theme. *Green* [\[http://www.fountainheadpress.com/vseries/green.html\]](http://www.fountainheadpress.com/vseries/green.html) and *Food* [\[http://www.fountainheadpress.com/vseries/food.html\]](http://www.fountainheadpress.com/vseries/food.html) came out in 2010, followed by *(E)ntity* [\[http://www.fountainheadpress.com/vseries/edentity.html\]](http://www.fountainheadpress.com/vseries/edentity.html), *Money* [\[http://www.fountainheadpress.com/vseries/money.html\]](http://www.fountainheadpress.com/vseries/money.html), and *Borders* [\[http://www.fountainheadpress.com/vseries/borders.html\]](http://www.fountainheadpress.com/vseries/borders.html) in 2011. Five titles are planned for the future, including *Terror*, *Sports*, *Death*, *Monsters*, and *Tolerance*. The series arranges readers around single topics to help students find their own voices as they explore a variety of perspectives within a particular discourse. In each reader students and faculty will find the topic explored across multiple genres, from song lyrics and poetry to memoirs,

editorials, and a variety of visual and new media texts. The V series includes assignment prompts but is primarily a reader series, not a rhetoric, leaving the choice of a rhetoric, if desired, up to individual faculty. While the readers can be adapted to any course seeking to engage a particular theme, I am particularly interested in how they might serve writing teachers interested in sustainability theory and pedagogy.

By examining a particular topic through multiple perspectives and genres, these readers help students to develop a multi-layered conception of one issue, tied to their own histories and experiences. Nedra Reynolds in *Geographies of Writing* (2004) argues that a multi-layered understanding of place is key to theories of writing. Because we respond to any discourse or topic from a grounding in a particular personal and social—even physical—place, fostering an exploration of those layers is key to empowering students not only to find their own voices, but also to articulate themselves effectively as they write in any given discourse or discipline. Students, faculty, and staff: as a university community, we are all “learners struggling to learn how the world works so that we can make the world better” (Farrell 11). The V series reinforces the connections in the classroom community through topics that inescapably intersect with all of our lives.

To that end, the texts in the V series each ask students to focus on layered topics, whether it is the concept of green, (e)ntity, or borders, or the seemingly more tangible food or money. Although it is never explicitly stated, many of the topics the series addresses are directly related to economic, social, environmental, and technological aspects of sustainability. The current economic crisis, climate change, food security—these are messy issues to tackle. In their essay on complexity and systems thinking, Morris and Martin explain, “Dealing with sustainability means dealing with a mess, and most people avoid messes because they feel ill-equipped to cope” (156). The V series makes such issues more accessible by focusing on one particular theme in each reader. Faculty interested in sustainable pedagogies can then work with students to discover where, for example, the topic of food intersects with social, economic, and environmental issues as well as any number of other topics, thereby helping students to understand not only their own relationship to the topic, but also the multi-layered relationships between themselves and other aspects of the complex systems through which we construct our worlds. In short, the content presented in the readers can aid faculty who want to help their students not only to write better, but also to cope rather than disengage.

For composition instructors who prefer to organize their courses around particular thematic content, any of these readers would work well for a full course. They are similar enough in structure and conception that programs requiring shared readers might consider adopting the series but leaving the choice of topical reader up to individual instructors. After a short introduction, each book contains a series of readings representing a range of perspectives on the topic, presented in a variety of genres. Readings are followed by a combination of shorter prompts and assignments classified as *explore*, *compose*, *invent*, or *collaborate*, aimed at helping students develop their own thinking on the topic based on what they’ve read, researched, and discussed in class. Five to seven major assignments, a filmography list, and a works cited follow the readings in each text.

Again, while the texts themselves don’t explicitly identify a sustainability agenda, instructors with a sustainable pedagogy in mind would find them appropriate in ways that move beyond content. For example, choosing a textbook that is produced mindful of affordability, environmental impact, and accessibility reflects a level of accountability to sustainable practice in the writing classroom. Fountainhead Press seeks to make their publications economically and socially accessible to students through affordability and alternative formats. Their textbooks are available in print or electronic form, and institutions’ disability services can request electronic files to adapt for students who require alternative formats. Fountainhead is also committed to environmental responsibility by offering alternatives to print through electronic formats and downloadable exam copies, using recycled paper when possible, and donating to environmental causes. I mention these things because from a sustainability perspective, tracing the textbook from inception to classroom can be as important as asking “Where does our water come from?” or “Where does our garbage go?”

Writing grounded in students’ own understanding of identity and voice, within the space of a particular discourse, underscores the idea that all writing is grounded somewhere—whether in identity, community, or a physical or virtual place. Both ecocomposition and sustainability studies urge classroom practices to be “continuously and directly connected to local and global communities,” providing opportunities for student writing “to effect change within communities” (Patrick <http://compositionforum.com/issue/21/sustaining-writing-theory.php>). These readers encourage such engagement through assignments designed to get students thinking locally and globally, working collaboratively with classmates and within their communities, and connecting to non-classroom audiences through writing assignments within the public sphere of social media such as blogs and websites, campus and community presentations, and print publications. Embracing a sustainability pedagogy also means adapting “to the learning, cultural, and spatial needs and contexts of individuals and communities over time” (Patrick). The V series facilitates such a pedagogy by providing the following: readings that address current issues relevant to students; content in a variety of genres that are accessible to students; and assignments that build on students’ familiarity with particular genres to encourage critical thinking and writing that is meaningful in real world contexts.

For example, through selected readings that include song lyrics, researched arguments, graphic novel excerpts, and more, [Green](http://www.fountainheadpress.com/vseries/green.html) [\[http://www.fountainheadpress.com/vseries/green.html\]](http://www.fountainheadpress.com/vseries/green.html) seeks to present a sense of the “complicated story about America’s relationship to, appropriation of, and identification with nature,” ultimately demonstrating the extent to which our individual and communal identities are entwined with our environments (Rollins and Bauknight 2-3). Assignments that move beyond traditional

academic essays include designing a website, producing a video, and working with community partners on a service learning project. The first short assignment in the reader asks students to explore pop culture texts like songs lyrics and performances recorded online to gauge cultural values with respect to the environment (7). The final major assignment in the reader asks students to compose a persuasive text, but leaves the genre and medium open (206-07). This reader thus addresses Farrell's and Orr's concerns by preparing students to navigate complex relationships to environment and to articulate their roles as citizens and experts through writing.

Food [<http://www.fountainheadpress.com/vseries/food.html>], meanwhile, opens with a recipe and personal narrative about that recipe's role in the identity of the author, followed by an activity that asks students to find their own recipe, analyze it, and write about it in a similar fashion (5). Another short assignment asks students to adapt a list of actions outlined in a piece by Wendell Berry to be more realistic for a "dorm-dwelling, college-aged audience" (28). A major assignment asks students to put their analytical skills to the test by analyzing a local restaurant menu (191-92). If any topic asserts itself in the daily lives of both students and faculty, it's food. Building from common ground, *Food* uses both the topic and a variety of genres familiar to students to provide opportunities for them to engage directly with local and global issues, at the same time honing their awareness of rhetorical strategies in their writing and the writing of others.

The reader *(E)identity* [<http://www.fountainheadpress.com/vseries/edentity.html>] engages students in exploring "questions of privacy, identity, and connectivity that have emerged from our lives online" (Vie 3). The reader defines (e)ntity as an individual's electronic identity resulting from the digital traces created any time that person makes an online purchase, uploads a photo to a social networking site, posts anything online, or conducts an internet search (Vie 1). The readings include newspaper articles, blog posts, even Twitter feeds. The assignments sometimes ask students to participate in these genres, or to think about them as they create an avatar or consider their own online activities. For example, one *explore* exercise asks students to choose a piece of their own writing, copy it into www.wordle.net [<http://www.wordle.net/>], and analyze the resulting tag cloud (5). A major assignment asks students to join an online community, beginning by observing and analyzing the culture and discourse, then participating actively in the community while being transparent about their purpose in being there. Students present their findings in a recommendations report for potential new members of the community (189-91). The reader aims to "reflect a more contemporary understanding of what writing might look like today" (Vie 4), with the goal that students, through reading and writing on the topic, will "add additional layers of understanding and meaning to [their] initial conception of [their] (e)ntity" (4). *(E)identity's* subject matter provides an excellent opportunity to help students to generalize writing skills while exploring both traditional and emerging venues for communication. By focusing on questions of identity, it requires students to reflect on personal relationships to culture and environment on local and global scales.

Money [<http://www.fountainheadpress.com/vseries/money.html>] and *Borders* [<http://www.fountainheadpress.com/vseries/borders.html>] follow a similar style, and all of the readers produced so far draw on current events, issues, and concerns—for example, *Money* includes texts about the Occupy Movement, while *Borders* includes articles and other texts about the latest immigration issues. Most of the selections in *Borders* are from 2009-2011, and *Money* contains selections primarily from the last ten years. *(E)identity* is also very current—two selections are from 1999 and 2004, and the rest are from 2006-2011—as is *Food*, with all but two selections from the last six years. In terms of timeliness, this is a real strength for those hoping to adopt the textbooks within the next year. However, because they contain such current information, particularly from digital media, there is a concern that the readers will become quickly outdated. An excerpt from print media seems to have a longer shelf and cultural life than a blog post, certainly than a Twitter feed. If Fountainhead continues to update their website with supplemental material such as suggested additional readings, syllabi, and assignments, I think this will help keep the texts relevant, and faculty who adopt the texts can certainly pull these materials together as well. Comparing recent and older Twitter feeds on the same topic by the same person, for example, might be another useful class activity in understanding how issues are shaped by sociohistorical context and what constitutes timelessness vs. timeliness.

Whether timely or timeless, it is easy to become excited about thematic content in the classroom, and the V series does an excellent job identifying topics of contemporary relevance. But when reflecting on our pedagogical design, we must always return to the question, what are we teaching our students? What do they leave our classrooms better equipped to do? Writing transfer—students' ability to transfer what they learn about writing in one class, for example, to other classes or to their professions—is fundamental to sustainable writing and has become in recent years an area of critical focus in composition studies. Elizabeth Wardle has suggested, "meta-awareness about writing, language, and rhetorical strategies in FYC may be the most important ability our courses can cultivate" by "help[ing] students think about writing in the university, the varied conventions of different disciplines, and their own writing strategies in light of various assignments and expectations" (82). Writing sustainably thus means, on one level, learning to write in ways that allow the transfer of skills and knowledge across the genres and discourses in which an individual will be required to engage. Will the readings and assignments laid out in the V series facilitate writing transfer? They certainly represent a more traditional approach to themed composition courses than, for example, Writing About Writing (WAW)-driven courses. But I believe the relevance of the readings to our students and ourselves as citizens in global and local communities will generate meaningful discussions that necessarily engage knowledge and rhetorical strategies across disciplines. As such, the V series readers can be adapted to a successful writing transfer pedagogy in line with sustainability-minded theory and practice.

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