

## Ideas Worth Spreading?: TED's Rhetorical Position in College Composition

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### Introduction

Beginning in 1984 as an annual conference event, TED—a nonprofit organization based on forging new connections among technology, entertainment, and design—started as an invitation-only affair and then grew to have an online presence in the 2000s. At that time TED.com launched an audio and video podcast series that made possible “a clearinghouse of free knowledge from the world's most inspired thinkers.” People now share their favorite TED talks online via social networks and use them to enhance motivational training sessions with groups of employees or students. The organization, whose goal is “to make great ideas accessible and to spark conversation,” has gained an international audience with the talks also featured in over 100 languages (“About”). These talks, always eighteen minutes or shorter, claim to highlight some of the major thinkers of our time and make their central arguments short and portable to the public.

At my institution, a regional university (approximate student population of 5, 000) located in the Deep South, some instructors regularly use TED Talks in their writing pedagogy. Proof of this digital tool's influence may be seen in Facebook posts (especially in 2014-15, the year of this study) to the department's composition group—a private community reserved for questions and concerns about teaching. I also see the use of the videos during composition orientation in August and in teacher-led discussions of the videos in classrooms I have personally

observed. Consequently, my first year at this particular campus made me wonder how often TED functioned as a presence in writing pedagogy, and this culture of TED led me to dig deeper into the message of the organization as well as to question what kind of influence its rhetoric might be having on the writers in first-year composition. I wondered how ubiquitous TED videos had become during the 75-minute class periods these instructors taught and how the videos themselves were framed in terms of meeting goals of teaching writing. I was also aware that although education scholars have engaged in research about TED, no study of its purpose has been undertaken by someone in the field of Rhetoric and Composition.

Therefore, I conducted a microstudy in which I interviewed three instructors—teachers I will refer to as Maryl, Kate, and Anne—who identified as TED enthusiasts, and I surveyed our department of composition teachers about their practices involving TED. While the most seasoned instructor (Anne) I interviewed praised TED for its interdisciplinarity and its ability to generate critical thinking, others with less experience were honest about the videos functioning as a fun “break” from lecture or class. Consequently, this study examines the moments when tools of pedagogy indirectly become the heart of our pedagogy and highlights how technology fads might generate a misleading impression of the writing process in general, particularly in the idea generating and brainstorming stages of writing. Additionally, by focusing on idea generation and brainstorming as elements in the writing culture of many composition classrooms, I specifically call into question the TED slogan’s premise of “ideas worth spreading” and emphasize the need to follow through on ideas rather than simply disseminate them.

Before this project moves into the classroom, it is useful to survey TED's rhetorical aims and mass culture's reception of those goals. While TED certainly has its supporters, some of whom are described in subsequent pages, some critics attack how the organization fulfills its mission. Martin Robbins in 2012 posted a critique of TED videos, describing his viewing experience in these terms: "The genius of *TED* is that it takes capable-but-ordinary speakers, doing old talks they've performed many times elsewhere, and dresses them up in a production that makes you feel like you're watching Kennedy announce the race to the moon." He further characterizes his encounter with each speaker as one that seems illuminating but is ultimately forgettable, where "sixteen minutes later I'm aware of only three things: the talk was awesome, I can't remember anything of substance from the talk, and I'm now watching a weirdly artificial standing ovation." Likewise, Benjamin Bratton warns that having these speakers perform like *American Idol* contestants suggests that ideas are easy to package and solve. He says, "Given the stakes, making our best and brightest waste their time – and the audience's time – dancing like infomercial hosts is too high a price. It is cynical." Bratton further explains that "If we really want transformation, we have to slog through the hard stuff (history, economics, philosophy, art, ambiguities, contradictions). Bracketing it off to the side to focus just on technology, or just on innovation, actually *prevents* transformation."

The phrase "ideas worth spreading," the famous slogan attached to TED.com, now seems widely accepted as a way of expanding one's view of the world. Implicit in this phrase is the notion that the possession of good ideas, however unsustainable those ideas may be in implementation, should be championed as the mainstay of progress in a civilized society. Similar

words like innovation and entrepreneur have received attention in the media lately, especially when tagged on to the biographies of people like Steve Jobs. The very notion of “ideas worth spreading” calls to mind an argument formerly made by rhetorician Karen Kopelson about the slogans associated with organizations such as Alcoholics Anonymous. In “Sloganeering Our Way toward Serenity: AA and the Languages of America,” she explains that “the more extensive the entry of a discourse into cultural ‘consciousness,’ the more unconscious our rehearsal of it is likely to be, and thus the more urgent our scrutiny of that discourse” (592). The portability and packaging of a commonplace phrase deserves our scrutiny, even if we accept it as a truism worth repeating. When asked about her fondness for TED videos in the classroom, one instructor at my institution said that the mission of “ideas worth spreading” is central to why she uses the films in her classroom. It inspires students to have their own ideas and to feel that they have a voice worth sharing via written texts.

Part of our American culture is the celebration of big ideas. Diana Senechal explains that a “typical TED Talk gives the impression that one need only feel and believe it to be part of it, like Peter Pan, whose wonderful thoughts allow him to fly. The TED viewer imagines himself an insider, capable of understanding the concepts because they excite him in the moment. Think big, dream big, he imagines, and he will *be* big too” (16). Andrew Russell and Lee Vinsel elaborate on another aspect of this same issue by explaining that while “the pursuit of innovation has inspired technologists and capitalists,” we must take into account what happens *after* the spread, however complex it may be, of innovation and ideas. In other words, we must consider that those with the “ideas worth spreading” may not be paying enough attention to what Russell

and Vinsel refer to as “maintenance and repair, the building of infrastructures, the mundane labour that goes into sustaining function.” Put another way, we might consider this way of thinking in a more direct fashion by imagining that Bob the Builder, the famous children’s character, did not just ask “Can we build it?” but, as an internet meme suggested, also questions “*Should* we build it?” What are the consequences of an idea? What happens once it is spread? Furthermore, what happens when ideas are not enough to sustain the writer writing? What does writing entail beyond the *having* of ideas and the *spreading* of them?

Finally, the charisma of the speaker who, as Senechal describes, “theatrically” (16) presents the TED talk, is sometimes the subject of parody and derision in our culture. John Oliver on HBO’s “Last Week Tonight” aired a recent satire of TED, called “Todd Talks,” in which the voiceover says, “Do you love science in all its complexity but wish it could be a little less complex? And a lot less scientific? At ‘Todd Talks’ we’ve raised the bar on entertainment by lowering the bar on what constitutes science. Why do we do this? Because you love science, but you don’t want to hear its process accurately depicted on the stage.” At an independent TED event in New York City, comedian Will Stephen also parodied the TED format in a short sketch. The introductory remarks of his dramatic delivery rise and fall in volume as he mocks the format of the usual TED speaker:

I have absolutely nothing to say whatsoever. *And yet through my manner of speaking, I will make it seem as if I do. Like what I am saying is brilliant. And maybe, just maybe,* you will feel like you’ve learned something. Now I’m going to get started with the opening. I’m going to make a lot of hand gestures...I’m going to adjust my glasses, and

then I'm going to ask you all a question. By show of hands, how many of you have been asked a question before? Ok, great, I'm seeing some hands. And again, I have nothing here.

Here we see how delivery itself becomes fetishized as the only rhetorical ingredient that has an impact on an audience. While empathy and connection to audience members is nothing to scoff at, the overabundance of showmanship characteristic of the single TED speaker has emotional pull with some of us, and such pull is substantial enough to give us pause. It should at least prompt us to reconsider what parts of this phenomenon are "worth spreading" in our culture, if the only part of an idea's presentation is its dramatic reveal. Bratton, Robbins, and Kopelson argue important points: the notion that any organization can choose ideas worth spreading and captivate us with them in a limited amount of time is worth scrutiny. It is particularly important to study if these videos become regular tools in the composition classroom.

## **Methodology**

My research began informally as a series of observations of TED videos used inside and outside the classroom (on the composition group's Facebook page, the observation of adjunct instructors, and the use of videos in composition orientation in August). I then applied for IRB approval through my institution and received expedited review and approval to administer a survey and to interview teachers. Fourteen instructors completed the six-question survey on TED videos and returned it to me during the spring semester of 2016 (see Appendix). The survey allowed teachers to skip questions or select more than one answer. Questions addressed

frequency of TED video use, instructor familiarity with TED's mission, criteria for selecting videos, and connection to writing pedagogy. I also asked teachers to indicate where they first encountered TED videos, and I asked them to explain what kind of discussion followed the viewing of the video in class (focusing on inspirational parts of the message, the limitations of knowledge shared, critique, or summary of main ideas).

I then followed the survey with three interviews from instructors. All three were women with varying degrees of experience in the composition classroom. In selecting instructors to interview, I contacted four instructors who had previously posted TED videos to our composition group page or had talked publicly about their love of TED. Only three instructors responded to the request. I asked seven questions in all:

1. Describe what you like most about TED videos in general.
2. Identify points in the semester you are likely to use TED videos.
3. Explain how you use TED to teach students how to write.
4. Why do you think TED videos are valuable to your pedagogy?
5. How do students respond to TED videos?
6. In what ways do you want students to use TED in research projects?
7. What else would you like me to know about your use of TED videos?

After interviews, I recognized that the question about research would be less fruitful since one of my instructors had not taught such a course yet (our institution teaches research in the second semester of composition); therefore, there is less attention to perspectives on research than I originally planned to share. Of utmost importance to me was the question about how TED helps

our instructors teach writing, with the other items playing a secondary role in depicting the experience of sharing these online resources with freshmen.

Before sharing results, I will explain how the composition program's philosophy shapes daily activities inside the classroom. Perhaps not surprisingly, the background theories that most regularly inform the first semester of composition courses at our institution could be considered a combination of early process theory and social constructionism. Evidence of this merging of the notable 1970s and 80s research (see Emig, Murray, Bartholomae, Bruffee) can be found most specifically in the in-house guide to composition created for students to purchase in our bookstore. The version given to students in 2015-16 encourages those in first-year writing to "create time and space for workshop" and to "look at [their] work in multiple stages" (6-7). Likewise, there is an emphasis on academic writing and an understanding of how genre works to shape a specific moment of communication (2).

Second-semester writing courses focus more specifically on research and are themed to create common topics of discussion. These topics range from popular culture texts such as *The Walking Dead* to more global studies of topics like immigration. Each instructor is permitted to select his or her theme for the second semester. Both courses rely on the study of the writing subject as she situates herself in a discourse community (Sanchez; Bartholomae) and learns to "join the conversation" of academic thinkers (Burke; Graff, Birkenstein, and Durst). However, instructors, by teaching a themed approach to research and discussion, reflect the cultural studies approach to composition by treating TED videos as texts, or artifacts, worthy of attention (Sanchez 67; Harris 11).



## Results

In asking teachers how often they used TED, half of the respondents agreed that they used it approximately three times a semester (Even two instructors indicated that they used the videos three times or more per month). The last six respondents used TED sparingly, with once a semester being typical for their writing class. One instructor Maryl indirectly refers to this lack of curricular cohesion in her first semester of composition instruction when describing her use of TED:

I use them in Comp 1 more than Comp 2 because Comp 1 is...Comp 2 is focused much more with research and following a particular path...Comp 1 I feel is...uh...more free form I guess. I use them all through the semester in Comp 1. I, um, since we do a blog post and there was a stage where they were supposed to do 70 blog posts a semester...I would play them sometimes every day when I first started using them and was full of TED vigor. Um, and I played one and just say, what do you think about that idea? Or, you know, say a few words and let them blog on what they heard in the TED talk.

Here we can see how composition as a field leaves some teachers feeling uncomfortable with what they perceive to be the amorphous workshop model of the fall semester. I had observed this particular teacher's classroom in a previous semester, so I knew she often turned to TED videos when searching for ways to diversify her class content. This is not to suggest that TED should *never* serve as a writing prompt designed to open the class with an idea that inspires or provokes thought. What happens, in this case, is that the "TED vigor" that Maryl describes becomes class content directed mainly at the formation of a series of blog posts. In this case, we don't know if

the blog posts are ever read or evaluated by the teacher; rather, we just know that “70 blog posts a semester” is the norm for this classroom.

What often happens is that a TED talk shared by the composition director during orientation models a cultural studies approach that informs what writing instruction looks like in composition. While the director may share the video only to inspire or encourage teachers who are new, the message received may be that a video like that can do the same for students if a teacher feels uncertain about how to use his or her time in a writing classroom that draws primarily from cultural texts to fuel its momentum. In my survey, I asked teachers where they had first heard of TED videos and 70 percent of instructors noted that they had either first been exposed to TED through a workshop connected to their employment and/or through a previous college or graduate course. This suggests that TED enthusiasm is being handed down from instructor to instructor more than it results from organic searching and thinking on the part of the teacher herself. Certainly, teachers are known to share resources and this sharing is part of building a community. Still, it is significant that only 30 percent answered that they found TED through their own online investigations or from a family or friend. Even students take part in sharing TED Talks with their teachers and friends: Anne mentioned in her interview that she especially grew excited when “they’ve even found TED videos and sent them to me—‘hey, this sounds like what we’re doing in class.’”

Indeed, most teachers at my institution use TED to teach idea formation and to emphasize a personal theme or approach to their writing class. On the survey 13 of 14 teachers mentioned idea formation (or selected it as an item in “all of the above”) as the goal behind incorporating

TED, and 11 out of 14 noted that they chose these films based on their individual class themes. While themed courses in composition raise many questions about composition's scope and sequence (see Adler-Kassner, Sirc, Finer, Friedman, Wardle, and Downs), lack of time and space prevents me from engaging fully in the history of that particular argument. However, what is important is the manner in which theme might eclipse writing itself as the primary objective in composition. One might then argue that TED, for some instructors, becomes a new pop culture text in the classroom, able, through its nonfiction and documentary quality, to seem more pedagogically sound with its connections to technology, entertainment, and design.

When surveyed, teachers indicated that when they showed TED videos to their classes, only two instructors noted that they follow the viewing with an emphasis on the inspirational qualities of the speaker. This is actually significant considering the lampooning mentioned earlier that surrounds TED talks and the speaker's ethos. Instead, two-thirds of these teachers said that they either encouraged students to critique the knowledge presented or asked the students to summarize what they heard. However, no teachers selected the option to "stress the limitations of the knowledge shared," which raises some questions about how well students recognize what Benjamin Bratton referred to as the "American Idol" quality of the videos themselves. What complicates this matter even more is that instructors indicated that they were not well acquainted with TED's history or mission; indeed, two-thirds of the respondents had "little" or "not really" any knowledge of TED's rhetorical aims. This result makes it easy to see how the limitations of knowledge would not make it to the forefront of a conversation about what TED speakers espouse on film. Without a full history of how TED developed as a

conference, we may fail to indicate to students the limitations of a talk designed to encapsulate only the key points of an idea rather than the idea's full evolution from hypothesis to systematic inquiry over time.

Another consideration that must be addressed is the notion that vocalizing stimulating ideas, as a practice, is by nature an incomplete task. TED's mission, to share "ideas worth spreading," does not address what to *do* with an idea once it is discussed. As Kate explained, when asked why she thought TED videos were valuable to her writing pedagogy:

"The talks themselves I like because they're short bits of information. There's enough to chew on for a while and to expand later on if you want to." She goes on to say, "I don't expect them to teach the class for me, but they...they plant the seeds, the little seeds of thought that maybe in [future] composition classes, in other courses, will sprout forth into 'oh, that's what she was talking about.' That's what that is...so...um...they're not the whole story. I just think they're a good jumping off point." Anne agrees and says that the magic of TED Talks is that they "bring the students to a new way of thinking" but do so in a way that is "accessible" and "brief enough to keep their attention."

The "jumping off point" that Kate mentions is important because I question to what extent we fetishize the generation of ideas as the main part of writing success. Are students brought to the "new way of thinking" that Anne mentions via an immersion in ideas worth spreading? Kate explains that one of her favorite TED videos is one by the author of *Eat, Pray, Love*. and she establishes why:

Gilbert says that writing is work, even when you're writing fiction; it is work, and some days you're going to nail it, and some days it is just going to be this torturous slog, and I like to play that sometimes to show them that...you can get famous from doing this...that you can do this really, really well, but it is still a JOB. It is still something that you absolutely have to do and you have to work at it. People are not born perfect writers.

Here the teacher admits that writing and idea formation are not easy processes. Nevertheless, she also, in the same answer, addresses the idea of fame and writing for a living as achievable goals. She mentions in an earlier paragraph how TED videos “plant the seeds” and provide a short “bit to chew on for a while.” These “little seeds of thought,” while easily and seemingly effortlessly packaged in a TED talk may often not shed light on how to handle the “torturous slog” of working through a draft. My data suggests a disconnect between what instructors value in TED’s messages—short, inspirational, and thought-provoking—and what their students actually confront in writing—something hard and torturous, a slog. If the TED talks demonstrate how easy and personal an idea may seem on the screen, then the process of making an idea come to life on paper is rarely as effortless or intimate. Kate describes her love for TED in terms of this intimacy it seems to foster: “I like...how they’re personal...how the crowds seem to be small...and the way they have them set up with the camera work and everything else...you see the people’s reactions so you know that you are feeling the same thing that they’re feeling. You’re laughing when they’re laughing...it’s almost like being there the way they have them set up.” Indeed, there seems to be an ease and intimacy to the ideas TED speakers impart, and identification with audience members results almost immediately. Conversely, in our writing,

this same effect may take years to master. This ability to identify and make audiences immediately comfortable is something that speakers who have worked for years on their projects might easily achieve on the small TED stage, but first-year writers often struggle to create an audience-driven project after years spent in high school testing situations.

Teachers most frequently commented on how TED functioned as an alternative to the traditional lecture. This echoes research done on the lecture as a pedagogical tool that has evolved over time. Friesen explains, “The dynamic and multimedial mix provided by the Web presents many possibilities for the lecture that can confirm its current—and longstanding—role as creating a living present for conversation...Not only does the lecturer, in a TED talk, for example, perform for the live audience on the occasion of the talk itself, but his or her lecture is situated in a quasi-conversational context when it is embedded in YouTube or elsewhere in the Web” (101). Anne champions the TED Talks because they feature “fascinating individuals, enjoyable individuals, it’s entertaining and it’s compelling so...it’s not me lecturing.” Likewise, Meryl is worth quoting at length for reporting honestly:

I never got the memo about...um...class participation and uh...that’s not it...what do you call it...student-led assignments and um...mostly I lecture a whole bunch...that’s what I’m trying to get at... I mean I am a facilitator but I do lecture a lot...and I’m sure they get tired of me talk so...I think that TED talks are good for...they can hear other people talk...I mean...other people with better jokes, uh, you know, other people with wildly different walks of life if then, you know, I hope they get something out of it. It’s like when you’re in the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, hey it’s time to show a movie, yay, film strip, yay.

Here we see the emphasis on lecture fatigue being mediated by the presence of something packaged in a multimedia form. The throwback to third grade illustrates how dependent some teachers are on these kinds of resources. Rather than chastise or fault these instructors for lacking the appropriate tools to teach writing, I argue instead that we must consider a revamping of our professional development for writing instructors so that tech itself is not praised as an antidote to the traditional classroom.

## Discussion

Novice teachers' adoption of TED videos as a writing prompt and source of inspiration need not trouble us, according to some. Education scholar Lisa Davia Rubenstein comments that such videos "provide relevant content that informs teachers of best practices, current issues, and innovative future possibilities" (266). If this statement seems reasonable, then what might go wrong, if anything, when we share TED in a composition orientation? In a professional development workshop? Or with our students?

To start, ideas are rarely as neat and tidy as TED suggests in the fifteen to twenty-minute viewing of the talks. Anne, the teacher with the most experience in a writing classroom mentioned how the videos were "perfectly packaged as an engaging, active mode of illustration." She stresses that the enjoyment comes from a student viewing something short enough to illustrate points that an eighty-dollar textbook sometimes fails to make to a student audience, particularly since, as she has observed, "textbooks are written from the point of view of the instructor." This idea of online resources being "perfectly packaged" is something that Bronwyn

Williams discusses in his critique of course management systems like Blackboard. He argues that such systems, when described in terms of their ease of use and their streamlined efficiency, often create more limitations and boundaries on knowledge than they enhance pedagogical objectives (178-79), especially since Anne also pointed out during her interview that she incorporates TED as part of her desire to keep multimodal and multimedia resources present in her classroom.

Likewise, the communication, and spread, of an idea is actually part of a larger ecology of forces that work together to determine how far it goes. Kristen Seas says that we ought to consider any idea's dissemination as one that occurs when it is "retroactively assigned to the ecology as a whole and not to any particular actor or idea within it" (63). She asks, "After all, when do we consider our work effective, when we get our idea to spread, or when our work becomes part of the constitutive environment, or when our auditors are socially susceptible?" (63). In other words, ideas don't simply spread—they entangle themselves with other agents to capture the public's attention. In other words, TED's introductory image of a water drop falling into a pond, making ripples as its effects are felt outward from the center, is not telling the full story of how things spread over time. The concentric circles moving out from the center suggest a clean, purposeful process uninterrupted by other events or forces.

In this sense, TED culture at a particular campus may suggest a need for renewed critique of what counts as effective writing pedagogy. If TED culture is so embedded in what teachers have learned from their director and those teachers have learned from other teachers (which is often the case at my particular institution), we have the problem that Sharon Crowley articulates in *Toward a Civil Discourse* when she says that "the more densely beliefs are articulated with



one another in a given belief system or across belief systems, the more impervious they are to rhetorical intervention” (78). In other words, the more frequent and embedded TED videos are in the daily activities of a given program’s ethos, the more such videos constitute their worth as part of writing pedagogy. This is not to say that the director is at fault for showing a TED talk at an opening professional development workshop and having new teachers be inspired by the message. The new teacher training sessions that many of us attend in August at various schools are entirely different rhetorical situations than a day in first-year composition. Often teachers at such sessions have not received their first paycheck, they are frightened and overwhelmed by their new responsibilities, and they are occasionally resentful to sacrifice the end of their summer by attending meetings. These tensions are often mediated by a short film that can inspire people to relax or recognize that they are not alone in facing challenges.

Yet, in such stressful circumstances, mistakes in transfer do occur. In fact, another instructor, Kate, mentions that one reason she wants students exposed to these new ideas through TED is because, like new teachers, new students at college consider their freshmen year a “terrifying time, especially in the fall semester...and a lot of them are typically younger, fresh out of high school, first time away from home.” We can then see how the comfort and inspiration of a pedagogy workshop becomes the comfort offered to students unsure of how to function in a new environment. This desire to comfort and inspire is laudable in most cases, but it quickly leaves behind the same insecure teachers and students who lack the tools to perform their new roles in the classroom. The airing of a TED talk then becomes a small bandage on a much larger wound that requires attention.

One way to solve this problem is to replace the sharing of technological tools with the simulation of real classroom activity during composition orientation. The time spent showing teachers links to famous tools like TED, which could be easily distributed on a list of resources via email or shared folders, might be spent modeling how to scaffold and organize a class session so that objectives point toward specific goals for students. I have witnessed how two different universities, one large and one small, navigated composition orientation, and in both places, the orientation was a clearinghouse of sharing technical resources and gadgets that graduate students had found helpful in their instruction. While the nature of orientation may be different across regions and institutions, it is possible that the time we spend sharing our gadgets and links could be spent modeling the human behaviors that help writing instruction succeed. It is important to recognize that for some teachers an August orientation is the only exposure they have to the field of Rhetoric and Composition. Not all composition teachers have to complete a practicum course in composition pedagogy before they start teaching. In my home state, eighteen hours of graduate coursework in the field of English are all that is required to enter a room of freshmen and teach them to write.

Therefore, active modeling of lessons that help students see an idea through from start to finish is important to the content of our professional development. Seasoned instructors and professors may also do their part to point out the limitations of a tool as well as its strengths. For instance, TED talks fail to illustrate is that college writing and argument building asks for more follow through and less showmanship: projects must address opposing views, consider multiple perspectives, and suggest solutions as well as entertain the reader in the opening lines. For

example, when I teach students a unit on proposal writing, we spend the first week of this unit brainstorming problems on campus that students would like to solve. Part of this brainstorming process is narrowing down the ideas to ones that actually *have* solutions. This task helps students see the difference between a personal complaint with no solution and an actual problem to be solved. This difference is crucial to personal growth as well as development as a writer: to learn to function as adults, students must realize that complaints alone will not alter their reality but instead create the image of entitlement.

Even more important is the next step, where students are asked to carefully consider which solutions are feasible, which means taking into account how long it would take, how much it would cost, and who would need to implement the change. In thinking through these steps, students begin to understand the concept of a project's scope and the manageability of scope as they move forward to suggest a solution to any problem that might plague them in a new phase of their lives. It also forces students to create a plan for an idea, not just simply spread it and wait to see what happens.

As faculty, we know how easy it is to dream big—some of us may spend our time dreaming with other colleagues, imagining curricular changes and future scholarly projects we wish to tackle. In many cases, however, feasibility and time often limit us in what we can actually achieve. Annual reports to our supervisors then become balancing acts of what we actually achieved and what we hope to achieve in the future. On the other hand, TED videos may give the impression that idea formation itself is all we need: if we have the right idea, someone else will work out the details for us. All we need is to announce and spread the idea to make it

come to life. At the Stevens Institute of Technology, Vinsel, reacting to the overemphasis on innovators in our culture, spearheaded a conference in April on the importance of society's "maintainers," people who "share an interest in the concepts of maintenance, infrastructure, repair, and the myriad forms of labor and expertise that sustain our human-built world." Speakers at this conference concerned themselves with disasters associated with poor infrastructure, a byproduct of innovation that often goes unnoticed. This event pushed back against the idea of idea generation as an event worthy on its own; instead, presenters called attention to how an idea's responsible and sustainable implementation and maintenance is just as, if not more, important than the original inspiration behind it.

Finally, as I mentioned earlier, the TED image of a water drop cleanly penetrating a still body of water and radiating outward is an incomplete and inaccurate picture of how ideas gather momentum over time. Suggesting that ideas regularly spread so easily is misleading to students and ourselves. As Senechal writes, "the TED Talk casts a complex problem in grand, uplifting, and unchallenging terms. While many individual TED Talks have merit, the conference as a whole has become the biggest forum for today's biggest fad: bigness itself" (16). She stresses that what we should be imparting to students is that "the best kind of study consists neither of following directions exactly nor of rushing toward innovation. It has to do with building one's knowledge and understanding of a field until insights start to come through. One need not wait years for insights, but they will deepen over time" (18). The same is true for new writing teachers, I would add. Learning to lead a classroom and help students improve their writing takes time, often years of practice. Short-circuiting that slow, sometimes messy process with

inspirational quotations from TED speakers may do a disservice to novices by encouraging them to take the easy way out rather than grapple with hard questions of what it means to be a writer, to teach writing, and to encourage others to engage in more writing that does not simply glamorize the spread of a big idea.

I am grateful to the teachers I interviewed for opening up about their pedagogical motivations and gaps in training. I am also grateful for their honesty in commenting on TED as a way to vary instruction and inspire people. In fact, I also have one TED talk I share with students: Susan Cain's "The Power of Introverts." I often use this talk to supplement a discussion on purpose and informative writing. In watching Cain and listening to her comments about what it means to be an introvert in an extroverted society, I hope my students understand that the information Cain shares is also a call for change in our classrooms and workplaces. This study of informative writing as both informative and persuasive is one we discuss as we interrogate the idea that a writer usually has only one purpose. In some cases, the viewing of this video is met with a few students who simply play on their smartphones and groan about the overuse of videos like TED. In other cases, the students are grateful, particularly the introverted ones, that I took time to select a speech that speaks directly to their lives. I have seen students take notes and get more energized by the presence of a new speaker in the day's lesson. Often it depends on how I frame the viewing of the text. On days where I simply "share" the video and stress my enjoyment of it, students fail to find meaning. On days I stress the goal of analyzing the speaker for her purpose and then writing down a list of examples that she shares to make her point, students accept TED's presence as a logical extension of my class lesson.

However, this small team of TED enthusiasts on my campus may speak to a larger pattern of technological seduction that may, at times, muddy the process of showing students how writing and research actually work. Our own investment and excitement in a resource may fail, at times, to infect the students in our charge; however, when it does infect them, we face the consequences of students growing up to share TED Talks in their own classrooms or business meetings without critically assessing the way in which ideas “spread.” Such viral transmission and widespread acceptance of a resource prevent what Crowley referred to as “rhetorical intervention,” an event we require of ourselves periodically in order to grow responsibly as leaders of a classroom. At times we as teachers, both new *and* experienced, need to assess when and how a technological resource ceases to be a tool and becomes the heart of pedagogy itself. In the case of TED, if writing becomes secondary to theatrical and packaged inspiration, then the work our students complete, especially the kind in which they write to propose a change or improvement to communities surrounding them, will not show attention to sustainability or material consequences. It is up to us to teach the value of ideas that evolve over time rather than simply praise the “big ideas” shared in eighteen minutes of video.

## Appendix

Questionnaire: Writing Teachers and TED videos

Answer these questions to the best of your ability, keeping in mind there is no right or wrong answer to give. Circle the choice that you feel best reflects your pedagogy.

1. As a composition teacher, I use TED videos in my instruction—
  - a. at least 3 times a month
  - b. at least 3 times a semester
  - c. once a semester
  - d. never
  
2. I am familiar with TED's mission statement and history.
  - a. yes
  - b. a little
  - c. not really
  - d. no
  
3. I FIRST learned about TED videos
  - a. browsing online or following links
  - b. from a friend or family member
  - c. in a meeting or workshop connected to my employment
  - d. when a teacher used them in undergraduate or graduate courses
  - e. other: \_\_\_\_\_
  
4. When I use TED videos in the classroom, I use them in the context of facilitating
  - a. idea formation
  - b. research
  - c. presentation skills
  - d. all of these
  - e. other: \_\_\_\_\_
  
5. If I use a TED video, the MOST important criterion in my selection is that:
  - a. the video is ranked highly in popularity on TED's website
  - b. the topic fits the theme of the writing class
  - c. the speaker is particularly inspiring and likable
  - d. the speaker is someone whose research should be explored more deeply
  - e. other: \_\_\_\_\_
  
6. After sharing a TED video with students, I immediately
  - a. focus on the inspirational parts of the message
  - b. stress the limitations of the knowledge shared
  - c. encourage critique or counterpoints from students
  - d. encourage students to summarize main ideas
  - e. other: \_\_\_\_\_

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