Cover Letter

English 301

14 Dec. 2010

Dear Portfolio Reader,

The practice of writing and revising the argumentative essays of this course has aided me in identifying both my strengths and weaknesses as a writer. Even further, this process was an opportunity for me to address those weaknesses and improve them. As a writer, I improved my organization and am able to evaluate which organizational style will be the most clear and most effective. I am also more critical of each claim I make, and I am sure to include specific evidence supporting them. Last, I discovered the importance of clearly stating and restating my claims. This has increased my clarity as a writer. The three papers I chose to include in this portfolio illustrate the strides I have made and the areas I still seek to improve.

The first paper I chose to include in my portfolio is my visual rhetorical analysis. In this paper, I evaluated the effectiveness of a Vitamin Water 10 advertisement in selling its product. Although I successfully described a number of reasons why I found the ad to be effective and fully explained my position, I often included too many different reasons in one paragraph. This created confusion in my paper because I failed to connect each of the bits of evidence I presented to a specific claim. Revising this paper taught me to improve the organization of my essay by separating my ideas and clearly stating a specific claim for each paragraph.

For example, I separated the claim ‘the ad successfully reaches its target audience’ from the claim that ‘the ad’s presence in Cosmopolitan Magazine helps to sell the product’ which had originally been contained in the same paragraph. I then dedicated a single paragraph to explaining
why I believe the ad reaches the intended audience. Before, the first sentence read “Another determinant of the success of an ad is whether it effectively reaches its intended audience.” I added the phrase “and Vitamin Water 10 does just that” (“Selling” 2). This establishes my claim right away, and signals to the reader the idea that I am going to be supporting throughout the rest of the paragraph. This more effective organization better communicates separate ideas to the reader and makes the purpose of each paragraph clear from the beginning.

Another aspect of my writing I improved was detailed analysis. In the original paper, because I had so many ideas contained in one paragraph, I tended to make broad analyses of the evidence I included. Separating ideas into more than one paragraph allowed me to specifically state how the evidence I presented supported my initial claim (“Selling” 4-5). Also, I ended each of these paragraphs by restating that claim. As a writer, I have learned to explain separate (albeit related) ideas, each with their own evidence.

I also improved as a writer by critically evaluating my evidence, or in some places, my lack thereof. This lead to me to see that I sometimes make or imply claims that I do not support. One such claim was “More and more people are connecting to each other through the internet and various social networking sites” (“Selling” 4). Although my audience may be aware of how frequently social interaction takes place online, I made this claim without actually proving to my audience that it is true. I assumed that the technological revolution was common knowledge, but in reality, many people do not fully understand the enormous scale of this cultural change. To fix this, I researched the number of users on two social sites — networking site Facebook and dating site eHarmony. Including this data supported the claim that an overwhelming amount of social interaction takes place online. This, in turn, taught me to increase my ethos (credibility) as a writer, by illustrating my commitment to testable data rather than my own ideas or assumptions.
The second paper I included in my portfolio is my Rogerian argument essay. In this essay, I explained the differing viewpoints on whether laptops should be allowed in the college classroom, and then advocated for their use. I successfully included all the main parts of the Rogerian model in my paper, but the order in which I organized the different sections made my paper confusing to read and I sometimes circled back to earlier points without clear transitions. As a writer, revising this paper aided in improving the way I organize my papers.

In the draft I turned in for instructor critique, I explained the ‘other’ side first, addressed common ground between their side and mine, explained my point of view, addressed benefits and downfalls for each position, then proposed a compromise between the two. Placing the benefits and downfalls together and placing them after I had already explained both sides was confusing for the reader. It also made it sound like I was returning to earlier ideas for no clear reason. To improve this, I moved the benefits of each side to directly after I explained the position. This made it so every section that described positive aspects (both the reasoning behind the positions and the benefits they offered) of each point of view were together. I left the common ground section between the first position I explained and my own point of view, as a way of transitioning from one stance to the next. I then combined the downfalls of each position into one paragraph that I presented just before the compromise (“Laptops” 5). This organization helps the reader be more willing to accept my proposal. Oftentimes, people become so entrenched in their point of view that they are reluctant to give anything to the ‘other side.’ But if they recognize that their side also has flaws, they may be more likely to compromise. These changes demonstrate that as a writer, I improved my ability to use the organization of my paper to maximize its clarity and effectiveness.

As with my first paper, some of my analyses and claims were broad and sweeping, so I revised this paper by becoming more specific in various areas. For example, I changed my claim
that “Others are fighting for the right to use laptops in class” to “Others, like eHow contributor Chris Joseph, advocate for the use of laptops in class” (“Laptops” 1). This tells my audience that I know of a specific person who actually supports laptop use in class, rather than simply assuming people like Joseph exist. I also made sure to provide precise analysis of quotes I included in my essay, rather than simply presenting a quote then moving on to the next point. For instance, after including a quote from a study by Carrie B. Fried about the effects of laptop use on student learning, I added, “Considering that the classroom is intended for learning, this data that laptops are damaging to student learning helps support those advocating for a classroom laptop ban” (“Laptops” 2-3). Last, I removed some of the personal experience I presented as support for my point of view, and replaced it with specific evidence from eHow contributor Chris Joseph and a personal testimony from another WSU student. Each of these changes helps illustrate that I have improved into a writer who is better able to present specific evidence and make precise analyses rather than generalizing.

The final paper I included in my portfolio is my argumentative research paper. In this essay, I discussed the theater production The Vagina Monologues and why I believe that it should be allowed to be performed on Catholic college campuses. Although I explained a multitude of supportive reasons for the Monologues, I now see that I spent a large portion of my paper informing my reader without connecting the information I provided back to my central claim.

I used the revision of this paper as a means to improve my clarity as a writer. For example, I reduced the amount of background information I included about injustices being committed against women and girls around the world, which The Vagina Monologues helps to combat. I then added the sentence “If these injustices are indeed occurring, then The Vagina Monologues is justified as a means to combat them” in the paragraph that gives evidence of Female Genital Mutilation being
inflicted on women (“The Right” 2-3). I knew that I had to establish that injustices against women are actually occurring before I contend that the Monologues are necessary for fighting against them. These sentences cue my reader that this is the exact purpose of the paragraph – to establish that the injustices are real and prevalent.

Last, revising this paper gave me another opportunity to improve my clarity as a writer through the practice of stating and restating my claims. For example, I altered the sentence “Sexual assault is clearly an epidemic that must be stopped” to include the phrase “and The Vagina Monologues contributes to doing just that” (“The Right” 3). This reinforces the claim I made at the beginning of the paragraph and shows the reader that this idea is separate from the paragraph that is to follow. This is a skill that I can utilize in any future paper, making it invaluable to me as a writer.

If given more time, I would like to improve two main aspects of my writing. First, I want to work on qualifying my sources. I appreciate an annotated bibliography as an opportunity to justify my sources as credible, but I would like to learn a way to do this within my papers without being excessively wordy. Second, I want to continue to practice being specific about how the evidence I present relates to my claim. I believed I have improved this quality of my writing significantly, as evidenced by the revisions I previously described. But I fear that my attempts to connect my evidence to my claims sometimes results in an overly wordy paragraph. I hope that with further practice and revision, I will improve both of these aspects of my writing.

Thank you for taking the time to read and evaluate my portfolio.

Sincerely,
Professor Coleman

English 301

14 Dec. 2010

The Right, Freedom, and Necessity to Perform:

*The Vagina Monologues* Should be allowed on Catholic College Campuses

V-Day is a global organization that works to end violence, primarily against women and girls all over the world. In eleven years, V-Day has raised over 75 million dollars that has been used in anti-violence and victim advocacy efforts ("About V-Day"). Much of this funding is raised through putting on benefit performances of *The Vagina Monologues*, a production consisting of a series of monologues written by Eve Ensler. Ensler interviewed over 200 women and created the monologues as a way of telling the stories about the lives of these women. This includes how they view themselves as defined as “women”, their sexuality, and their experiences with violence. One of the main purposes of the production is to break the silence about the experiences of any woman who wishes to speak. This in turn frees them from the stigma associated with violence and the oppressive stereotypes commonly associated with being female. According to Vday.org, “In 2010 alone, over 5,400 V-Day benefit events took place” (“About V-Day”). Many of these productions occur on college campuses, including our own WSU campus. However, there are some colleges and universities that refuse to allow the event to take place. These institutions are primarily Catholic universities, which more often than not have affiliation with the Cardinal Newman Society (“Opposition on College Campuses”). The Cardinal Newman Society is a group that promotes the teachings of the Catholic Church and often provides funding to Catholic Universities. One of the
country's largest Roman Catholic Universities, St. John's University in New York, is among the Catholic universities to ban the play at the urging of the Cardinal Newman Society (Robertson).

The decision to ban the production is a terrible disservice to those who would be empowered and informed by participating in and/or viewing the production. Even worse, it reduces the amount of funding generated for antiviolence efforts. The Cardinal Newman Society and affiliated universities often cite religious reasons for banning The Vagina Monologues. But examination of their claims reveals that the underlying reasons behind their assault on the production are gross misunderstanding of the production's contents, the desire to impose censorship on college campuses, and retaining financial control. The Vagina Monologues are part of a global, human movement to break the silence about the violence being endured by women and girls all over the world and to bring that violence to an end. Catholic Universities and the Cardinal Newman Society are doing much more harm than good by banning it, and the students at these universities should have the freedom to put on the production if they so choose.

The most important reason for allowing The Vagina Monologues to be performed on all college campuses, including those of Catholic institutions, is the overwhelming number of injustices being committed against women all over the world. If these injustices are indeed occurring, then The Vagina Monologues is justified as a means to combat them. One of practices that V-Day seeks to end is Female Genital Mutilation or FGM. The World Health Organization (WHO) identifies multiple procedures that qualify as FGM, but each of these procedures includes altering the genitals for non-medical reasons, often without anesthetic or post-surgery care ("Female Genital Mutilation"). According to the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) these procedures can cause a number of dangerous medical conditions, including the formation of cysts, pelvic infections, recurring urinary tract infections, and infertility ("Policy Statement"). Ellen Gruenbaum, writer of
The Female Circumcision Controversy reports that some form of FGM is practiced in twenty-eight countries in Africa (7). These injustices are obviously being inflicted on women and girls all over the world, and any effort to stop them should be encouraged. The Vagina Monologues is one of those efforts.

Along with combating FGM, the core mission of V-Day is to end gender violence, the most prevalent type being rape. In order to justify the production of such a controversial play, there must be a real need for the money it raises. In other words, rape must be qualified as an actual problem. The 1st Session Report of the 108th Congress to the House of Representatives provides evidence of the prevalence of rape in the United States alone:

On average, a person is sexually assaulted in the United States every 2 minutes. The Department of Justice reports that 248,000 people in the United States were sexually assaulted in 2001. Statistics show that 1 in 6 women and 1 in 33 men have been victims of rape or attempted rape. Additionally, statistics indicate that 44 percent of sexual assault victims are under the age of 18, and 80 percent are under the age of 30. Sexual assault affects women, men, and children of all racial, social, religious, age, ethnic, and economic groups in the United States.

(United States Cong. par. 3)

This illustrates the extreme prevalence of rape, and that no person is safe from its effects.

Rape is also widespread around the world, such as the African nation of the Democratic Republic of Congo. According to Wairagala Wakabi, a 2007 United Nations survey found that over 50,000 cases of rape were reported in that year alone. Sexual assault is clearly an epidemic that must be stopped, and The Vagina Monologues contribute to doing just that.
All of the proceeds from *The Vagina Monologues* benefit productions fund efforts to stop these horrible injustices from occurring. Throughout its operation, V-Day has worked with local organizations in Egypt and Iraq to build the first-ever shelters for women. V-Day also played a key role in establishing Karama, a program “that works to build upon and strengthen efforts to end violence against women by bringing together local women's organizations and other civil society groups in collaboration, analysis and advocacy at national, regional and international levels” (“About V-Day”). The Karama project works towards collaborative anti-violence efforts in Egypt, Sudan, Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon (“About V-Day”). In Goma, Bukavu, and Kinshasha, V-Day, UNICEF, and local groups worked together to organize an event called “Women Breaking the Silence.” During the event, sexual violence survivors spoke out about their experiences with violence and the effects that violence has had on their lives (“Women Breaking the Silence”). Being allowed and encouraged to talk about the sexual violence they experience empowers women and begins the process of healing. It also raises awareness about the prevalence of sexual assault. *The Vagina Monologues* has undoubtedly made significant contributions to ending global injustices, and should therefore be encouraged anywhere, even on Catholic campuses.

In the last eleven years, V-Day has raised over $75 million for these efforts (“About V-Day”). Even here in Pullman, V-Day has made tremendous strides in ending gender violence and advocating for survivors. I am the current President of V-Day WSU, our local V-Day organization. I know that in the last nine years, V-Day WSU has raised approximately $60,000. Of that amount, about $40,000 has been donated to Alternatives to Violence of the Palouse, or ATVP. ATVP provides legal advocacy, counseling, medical services, a confidential shelter, and various other services for survivors of violence (“ATVP: About Us”). Because V-Day WSU has been allowed to
perform The Vagina Monologues on campus, they have avoided paying any sort of fee for use of a community or off-campus theater. This leaves more money to be donated to ATVP and the national V-Day campaign. Without the benefit productions of The Vagina Monologues conducted by students at WSU, on WSU’s campus, these services would have reached far fewer survivors of violence. Clearly, The Vagina Monologues generate substantial and much needed revenue that is used to end violence both locally and around the world. None of this would be possible without campus productions of the Monologues, and Catholic universities should be contributing to these efforts, not hindering them.

Another crucial reason for allowing The Vagina Monologues to be performed on all college campuses is its ability to positively impact the lives of both those involved with the production and those who see it. There is no better way to demonstrate this effect than through personal testimonies. V-Day activist from Providence, Rhode Island Nancy Rafi, shared the impact that The Vagina Monologues has had on her life as part of V-Day’s 2009 Annual Report. She said, “By coming forward and being a vocal survivor of both sexual assault and domestic violence, I showed other women that they could do the same. I’m most proud of having had the opportunity to inspire other women to engage their activism” (“VDAY Turning Pain to Power” 22). Participation in the Monologues empowered Rafi enough to tell her own story of violence, and to inspire others to do that same. After watching The Vagina Monologues, Suzanne Skees said, “never again could I imagine myself as separate from any survivor of violence.... We cannot change past injustices, but we absolutely can heal one another’s hurts through small acts of kindness that add up to enormous power” (“VDAY Turning Pain to Power” 33). Once again, this gives credence to the idea that the Monologues contain the power to change lives. Skees entire view of victims of violence as a group to which she did not belong and her ability to enact future change was completely altered. Here
too, at WSU, the powerful effect of the Monologues has been felt. V-Day WSU Graduate Coordinator Nichole Olson shares her experience:

V-Day and *The Vagina Monologues* have had an enormous impact on my life. It has given me the opportunity to see how courageous and resilient survivors of violence are able to transform their experiences into a powerful catalyst for social change. It has given me the opportunity to break the silence, share my own story with others, and to make a difference in my community. (Olson)

Once again, the ability of the Monologues to free survivors of violence from their past and to inspire positive social change is remarkably evident.

According to M. Cathleen Kaveny, the *Monologues* have been criticized because they do not reflect the experiences of all women, including the “happy wife and mother” (Kaveny 15). However, she goes on to explain that “the point of the monologues is not to showcase women flourishing in accordance with mainstream standards of success. It is rather to spotlight women struggling against and overcoming shame, social isolation and even violence” (Kaveny 15). Sycamore Trust, a group founded by Notre Dame Alumni, also expresses its opposition to the production’s content. They state that the production does not actually represent an anti-violence movement, but that if one were to “Erase the passages celebrating homosexual, heterosexual, and autoerotic sex and the female sexual organ...there is no play left” and that only “a total of 151 lines in this 124 page play” actually tell stories of violence (“Monologues – Sex or Violence?”). This assertion greatly oversimplifies the contents of the production. The Sycamore Trust fails to note that although a description of violence may only be a few lines long, an entire monologue tells the story of a real woman who experienced that violence but eventually made it to this place to share her story. Yes, some of the monologues include descriptions of sexual experiences – but these experiences helped
the women to heal the pain of their violent pasts and to love themselves as women. Groups like the Cardinal Newman Society and Sycamore Trust may have a problem with extra-marital and homosexual sex practices, but this does not change the fact that these stories are true. The women in the monologues are not afraid to talk about their pasts, be it taboo or not. These women do not conform to the narrow beliefs of the Church, and for this reason their voices are silenced. The simple fact is that every woman has the right to speak, whether others like what they have to say or not. No one is forced to participate in or attend the production, so those who do not agree with what these real women have done need not attend.

One of the monologues most often referred to by those opposed to the production, including the Cardinal Newman Society, is called "The Little Coochie Snorcher That Could." The monologue relates the true story of a woman who experienced violence multiple times in her life, including a rape by her father’s best friend. This woman grew to hate her vagina (which her mother called her coochie snorcher) and to associate it and her own femininity with shame and pain. It is only after a sexual experience with an older, lesbian woman, does the author learn that her coochie snorcher is not something to be ashamed of, but rather a beautiful part of her as a woman. The Cardinal Newman Society website provides information on its stance on the monologue, stating that it is, "telling tales of lesbian activity and masturbation, and declaring the lesbian rape of a teenage girl her ‘salvation’ which raised her into ‘a kind of heaven’" ("About the CNS Campaign"). The use of the word “rape” gives the strong indication that CNS does not approve of this piece. But once again, critics of the production misrepresent its content. The sexual activities in this monologue were completely consensual. There was no rape.

The fact that the CNS cites lesbian activity as a reason for banning this particular monologue reveals one of its underlying warrants – that there is something wrong with lesbians and what they
choose to do with other women. This also implies that lesbians should not be allowed to talk about their experiences. This paper is not intended to argue whether being gay is right or wrong. But in spite of whether these women should be gay or not, there is still the undeniable fact that they exist. They are still human beings whose stories and experiences are just as important as anyone else’s. This is one of the vital purposes of the Monologues — to tell the stories of any kind of woman, no matter how politically incorrect it may be. It would be different if Eve Ensler had invented the story of the Coochie Snorcher. Perhaps then we could question her motives for doing so. But the fact is that this story is true, and the monologues exist to tell the truth. If they were to be censored, then they would no longer accurately reflect the experiences of real women, who live and breathe just like the rest of us.

The Sycamore Trust also makes the argument that allowing the performance of a monologue such as this endorses and encourages lesbian behavior (“The Vagina Monologues”). While V-Day does embrace the idea that all women are equal and free to do with their bodies what they like, nowhere in the monologue does the woman tell others to go out and engage in lesbian activity. She simply tells her story of how males in her life abused her and her vagina, causing her to hate it and herself as a woman, and how a lesbian woman showed her that she was beautiful and worthy of love. Although the means may have been unconventional, the end result was that a woman who had endured violence and rape learned to love herself. This is not promoting lesbian activity — it promotes healing, growth, and self-respect.

The Cardinal Newman Society implies that banning the Monologues is morally right, and this is evidenced by the number of Catholic universities that have been reclaimed from performances of the production (“About the CNS Campaign”). CNS boasts about the number of Catholic Universities that have withdrawn their support for The Vagina Monologues, stating that “The Cardinal Newman
Society’s 2006 campaign to stop “The Vagina Monologues” performances and public readings on Catholic campuses across the United States was a success. A then-record-low 22 Catholic colleges and universities hosted the “Monologues” in February and March (“About the CNS Campaign”). They imply that this decline in the number of participating universities is related to “reclaiming Catholic campuses for Catholic values” (“About the CNS Campaign”). However, they fail to reveal that their campaign against the Monologues includes the threat of pulled funding from universities that choose to allow the production to take place on campus (“Opposition on College Campuses”). Therefore, it is impossible to truly know how much “reclaiming Catholic Universities for Catholic values” really has to do with the decision to ban the production. It very well could have just as much to do with financial security. There is no evidence that the Monologues are being banned because it is the ‘right’ thing to do.

Even among the intense disagreement about the Monologues, compromises can be reached between the two sides. There is no denying that The Vagina Monologues present experiences and practices in contrast to the conservative teachings of the Catholic Church. There also exists the prevailing belief that Catholic Universities should remain faithful to these teachings in its actions (“About the CNS Campaign”). However, those opposed to the production being performed on Catholic campuses fail to acknowledge that students can do so without the endorsement of the University. The University could even require that fliers for the event or signs at the event clearly state that the University does not endorse the production. Universities have the ability to issue public statements, explaining their position on The Vagina Monologues. The University can retain its Catholic identity, while allowing the students to act outside of it. As stated previously, no one is forced to see the production or take place in hosting it. Only those who wish to hear its message will, and those who vehemently subscribe to the teachings of the Catholic Church need not attend.
*The Vagina Monologues* are an integral part of V-Day. The production and presentation of this work is responsible for the majority of funds that V-Day uses to successfully combat violence and sexism all over the world. It also gives survivors of violence the freedom and power to break the silence about their experiences and to use them as motivation for social change. The opposition to *The Vagina Monologues* on Catholic college campuses is a product of misunderstanding, narrow views, and financial power. Even though the Monologues present stories containing events that are in contrast to teachings of the Catholic Church, the stories are true. The experiences of these women are real and others should have the freedom to tell and hear them. By banning *The Vagina Monologues* on their campuses, certain Catholic Universities are hindering the efforts that V-Day is making to end violence against women and girls. This hindrance, in turn, gives power to those perpetrating the violence and hate against women. This cannot be allowed to happen. Catholic Universities should allow their students to fight violence and encourage social change any way they can, even if they do not agree with all aspects of the chosen event.
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