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(Full Time Academic Staff, Instructor)

Teaching Philosophy

When I began teaching communication and media studies, I saw my role primarily as a translator of sorts – explaining and illustrating complex conceptual material in terms that the uninitiated would better understand. Over the past ten years, my teaching practice has evolved to reflect my current belief that effective teaching strives to connect with and inspire students by recognizing them as whole people, who bring a diversity of learning styles, life experiences, and educational goals to my classroom. Beyond translation, then, I now see my role as multi-faceted: (1) to *motivate learners by being an empathetic mentor*; (2) to *facilitate learning that is meaningful to students' lives through experiential and dynamic learning experiences*; (3) and to *cultivate an inclusive and engaging learning environment that helps students thrive*, even as they're being challenged to take intellectual risks.

To motivate learners through empathetic mentorship.

I approach my interactions with students as a form of mentorship. Being a mentor requires a willingness to be open and genuine with my students, to reveal something of myself – my humour, my passion for the material, and even the limits of my own knowledge – to put them at ease. Presenting myself as an empathetic figure who is approachable, accessible, and available, is foundational to building connection between

> "Dr. Thrift teaches in such a way that you are swept up in excitement and academic curiosity alongside her."
> - COMS 401 student (fall 2017)

people. My goal is to create an atmosphere of support, empathy and trust that encourages students to share their concerns, struggles, and new ideas without fear of judgment; in other words, I strive to create the conditions in which students *want* to speak. As an instructor, I'm at my best when students open up, ask questions, share new ideas, and identify problems because we can then have a responsive, productive conversation together. In those moments, learning becomes a collaborative process between student and instructor. I take a humanist approach to these collaborations, by working with students to identify their specific strengths and challenges in order to move the "ball" forward. My intent is to motivate students to do their best.

To facilitate learning that is meaningful to students through dynamic learning experiences.

I believe that students learn best when knowledge feels meaningful and relevant to their lives. Therefore, I frequently pair theoretical scholarship with hands-on activities that require students to learn through a process of *doing* and *reflecting.* Informed by critical and feminist pedagogies, participatory learning methods, such as research-creation projects and media-making assignments, help learners' draw connections between course materials, their personal experiences, and the larger social and cultural contexts in which they are rooted. From memoirs to digital stories, experiential learning strategies aim to personalize students' understanding of media through its creation, thus empowering learners to self-actualize as practitioners as well as effective essay writers. Moreover, the reflective component of these active learning strategies

> "Interesting content – helped me to think critically."
> – COMS 401 student (fall 2017)

encourages students to develop a capacity for intellectual and creative risk-taking in ways that traditional learning activities rarely do. In this way, my teaching approach strives to make learning a journey of students' self-discovery as critical, independent, and innovative thinkers.

To cultivate an inclusive and engaging learning environment that helps students thrive.

Students are more likely to achieve success when they feel valued and included in the classroom. There are many strategies I put into practice to ensure that my students feel respected and supported in their education. For example, I choose to model inclusive language, to draw on diverse media examples in class, to be mindful of who I call on to speak, and to establish ground rules for respectful interaction at the beginning of term. My central message to students is that people of diverse backgrounds and experiences all have skills, knowledge, and qualities that can be built on, and that this diversity enriches the educational environment. Modeling this idea in the classroom speaks to the role instructors have in fostering students' good citizenship practices outside the educational institution.

> "Samantha Thrift is great at making discussion a safe place for students to share their thoughts. There's a lot of room to challenge our thinking and I can truly say I learned a lot"
> - COMS 473 student (fall 2017)

> "You were really meant to be a professor. Or an informative, social critical comedian. Thank you for making the class enjoyable and a fun space for me this semester." - COMS 201 student (fall 2017)

In addition to being an inclusive space, I also believe that the learning environment should be positive, even fun. Although academia can be challenging, for many reasons, I strive to make learning an affirmative, constructive experience for my students. For me, this can mean developing creative assignments that appeal to different learning styles or "gamifying" test review sessions. Often, I try to inject an element of humour into a lesson plan because, in my experience, laughing together creates harmony and a sense of community in the classroom. Ultimately, I believe learning is a fundamentally social process founded on human connection. It comes most easily in a positive environment, which fosters in students a strong sense of self-belief and a lasting curiosity about the world that extends beyond my classroom. In the following section, I describe some of the ways in which I put these beliefs into practice.

Teaching Strategies and Methodologies

Inspired by critical and feminist pedagogical investments in active and experiential modes of learning, my teaching strategies aim to bolster students' curricular engagement, their acquisition of new ideas through application, and the development of critical and creative approaches to new ideas.

Strategy 1: Progressive Skill-building

First, as a form of mentorship, my teaching aims to motivate students to see themselves as capable, skilled learners with valuable contributions to make. Therefore, I use strategies that intend to build up students' intrinsic motivation for learning. I set realistic performance goals and help students achieve them by designing assignments that are engaging and appropriately challenging for the class, given their experience and aptitudes. Key to this strategy is the use of assignment scaffolding, where I stagger different skill-building components

> "You can tell she actually wants students to do well in her class"
> - COMS 471 student (winter 2017)

of an assignment across the semester, so that students can focus on achieving a specific learning goal (ex. mastery of concept) before moving to another (ex. application of concept). I find this approach works well for both traditional and non-traditional assignment types. When students are asked to conduct a media analysis essay in my *Race, Representation, and the Media* class, for instance, I break the project into three stages: proposal, draft submission & workshop, and final submission. Clear guidelines, rubrics, and learning objectives are provided for each component, so that the students and I are working with a shared understanding of the assignment's goals.

Organizing complex projects in this way allows me to provide formative and detailed feedback on student work at regular intervals through the term, thus placing emphasis on the *process of learning*. When a student's performance does not indicate success for the upcoming stages of the assignment, I offer them an opportunity to revise and resubmit with the caveat that they meet with me for additional tutoring and discussion of where we each think the assignment "went sideways." Some students are motivated by the chance to improve their letter grade (I average the initial and resubmitted grades), but most express relief at simply having a second chance to "nail" the assignment and demonstrate that they can do better. I've found that this flexibility combats grade-based demoralization because students come to understand that a letter grade does not define them (or my perception of them) as learners. Rather, it shows that learning itself is an ongoing process and that "failure" is an opportunity to demonstrate their resilience in the face of academic challenges. This way of framing a tough result can renew students' optimism and excitement about their educational experience. And when I see students choose to do the work of a resubmission, my own willingness to create new pathways for student success is reaffirmed.

> "Thank you so much for your support this past semester. You have inspired me to embrace creativity as an academic and prioritize self-care as a person. I hope you know what an immense difference you have made as a compassionate educator and mentor." – handwritten card from student (COMS 591, fall 2018)

Strategy 2: Creative Assignment Design
Second, I use creative assignment design to foster *active and experiential modes of student learning*. Creative assignments are non-traditional and novel assessment methods or outputs by which instructors can gauge student learning; in my courses, these activities includes assignments such as digital storytelling, multi-media memoirs, interactive digital mapping, fan auto-ethnographies, and video chainletters. I was initially driven to innovate course assignments out of frustration and, admittedly, boredom; teaching seven courses per year had inured me to the pleasures of grading student essays and final exams. Non-traditional assignments re-ignite my enthusiasm for student work, but they also give me unique insight into students' capacity for creative problem solving. As a result, I have come to use these assignments to target learning objectives that conventional assessment methods (ex. essays, tests, exams) tend to deprioritize, such as collaboration, adaptability, creative problem solving, risk taking, and self-reflection. Creative assignment design, then, is one method I use to cultivate an inclusive and engaging learning environment that helps students thrive because they can target a wider array of learning objectives.

Creative projects require students to put *conceptual knowledge into practice* or, as one student remarked to me, it gives them a chance to "not just regurgitate" course material in an essay. In fall 2018, for example, my students and I organized an end-of-term exhibit of student works. Held at the Taylor Institute, the exhibit showcased photographic works created by students in my COMS 591: Media & Memory seminar (see Appendix A for assignment guidelines, student work, and end-of-term exhibit poster). Colloquially known as "looking into the past" photographs, these images juxtapose "vintage" snapshots of campus (found by students in the University's archives) against the contemporary landscape in order to spark nostalgic contemplation about the passage of time. The exhibit was the culmination of students' study of "nostalgia media" in the course, which included written analysis of scholarly works on nostalgia, mediated memory, and archives, training in archival research and citation (held at the University's Archives and Special Collections), and application of this conceptual knowledge through the making of individual photographs. Students also uploaded their photographs (and accompanying synopses) to a digital map, collaboratively creating an interactive "archive" of campus memory sites that was featured at the exhibit's launch. The digital map and exhibit itself provided an opportunity for students to engage in *knowledge translation*, where they learn how to communicate the scholarly concepts informing their photographic works to a non-specialist audience of friends and family. I believe such practices help students understand how academic work may be used to engage broader communities through the construction and sharing of knowledge.

Students have indicated that creative updates to familiar assignments, like reading responses, is a useful pedagogical method for driving group conversation and collaborative problem solving. In fall 2016, I experimented with a creative reflection exercise – a "video chainletter" – inspired by VHS video chainletters sent between amateur women filmmakers in the early 1990s. Working in small groups, a student begins the video chain by recording their critical reading response to an assigned text, ending their video message with a prompt, to which the next student responds. This process is repeated until every student in the group has added their "link" to the chain. The end product is a sequential digital "conversation" about course content among peers. The assignment circumvented the logistical issues that tend to plague traditional forms of student group work, while enacting the VHS chainletter model studied as part of the curriculum. These activities help make the curriculum relevant to learners by personalizing their understanding of ideas and concepts through critical and creative processes of media making.

> "Keep the [video] chainletters project! It makes students get out of their element, apply theory, work together in a new way – it's like a more advanced version of reading responses." – COMS 591 student (spring 2017)

Strategy 3: Critical Reflection
Last, *critical reflection* is a key part of active learning, and I build in opportunities for self-reflection in assignment-specific ways. When I run my digital storytelling assignment – wherein students create a 2-3 minute video documenting a personal narrative – they must also submit a 5-6 page written reflection that makes explicit the ways in which theoretical frameworks inform the video creation process: technologically, personally, and politically. Echoing Dewey (1997 [1938]), reflection is an essential practice for transforming experience into genuine learning; in this case, to think about how making a personal video can be an emancipatory or empowering

act. Reflection ensures that these assignments are not simply creative for creativity's sake, but have educational purpose.

In my COMS classroom, I use creative assignments to enhance students' comprehension of the intersectional politics of identity formation, media access, authorship and (self-) representation, and community building through media-making practice. In the context of my Video Activism class, for instance, powerful moments of critical reflection took place during the students' Work-in-Progress [WiP] presentations, partway through the term. Structured as quick, Pecha Kucha style presentations, students explained their projects to their peers, talked about their progress, and brainstorm solutions to project challenges with the class. While some of these questions were technical (ex. how to edit a frame or add titles), others were more critical. Two of my students, who identify as white, cis-hetero men, expressed concern that their videos were not particularly "meaningful." By that, they meant their personal narratives were not (and could not be) informed by lived experience of racism, sexism, or cultural dis-location, as were several of their peers'.

This moment was fascinating to me – because although these students characterized their videos as "failing" in the context of a course on activism, inequality, and oppression, I saw these young people as critically reflecting on the diversity of personal experience – a key principle of feminist pedagogy. Unexpectedly, the digital storytelling assignment had disrupted the invisibility (or normativity) of white, male heterosexual identity, by seemingly rendering that experience as "insubstantial" within the activist media classroom. They didn't seem to realize it, but these students were engaging in critical thinking about their own experiences and so, in the moment, I encouraged these students to think of their response to the assignment – the perceived "unworthiness" of their personal narratives – as an important observation unto itself for what it revealed about their identity, positions of (relative) privilege and social power – themes that could be taken up in the written reflections. For me, I realized that the WiP presentation can serve dual purpose – not only does it provide a space for collaborative problem solving and project support, it also generates intimacy within the class, as students bear witness to each others' personal stories. Intimacy is pedagogically important here, as it generates empathy and deeper understanding of the diversity of experience amongst peers.