

Reflective Teaching Portfolio (Fall, 2016)

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1.) Statement of Teaching Philosophy

My background as both a student and a teacher is nontraditional in many respects. Having completed my graduate education long after many people in my age group was both a challenging and an eye-opening experience. While friends and relatives were “getting on” with families and careers, I was taking classes with students ten years younger than I and listening to lectures by faculty members barely ten years older. Finding myself positioned between these two populations, however, made me acutely aware of both the positive and the negative impulses and habits typical of both subject positions. While it’s difficult to overcome long-held ideas about the power dynamics between *educators* and *learners*, both sides, I often found, missed important educational opportunities by sticking too rigidly to the teacher-student dialectic and relying too heavily on the notion of fixed, received truths.

My core goal as an educator ... at least the goal I continually challenge myself to strive toward ... is to be *intellectually honest* with myself and my students. More important than projecting a sense of *institutional authority* or *intellectual mastery*, I endeavor to exemplify the fact that *teachers are learners too*. To this end, I constantly highlight the various assumptions and methods by which I’ve come to formulate my own ideas, all the while pointing out the fact that *any* intellectually engaged person can use similar tools to examine the data and draw their own conclusions. Instead of doling out “proofs” and “correct answers,” therefore, I style my lessons as efforts to come up with *reasonable solutions to complex problems*.

That having been said, I also feel it is my duty to share *the best* of my ideas and outcomes with my students, both in the interest of providing robust models against which they can measure their own achievements as well as to give them substantive positions to engage with and critique. To this end, I do not adopt a banal, impersonal pseudo-objectivity with respect to conflicting viewpoints, but clarify why I believe a certain position holds more weight. Having done so, however, I also and at the same moment make it abundantly clear that it is the clarity of their responses to and understanding of my positions ... and not their ability to parrot them back to me ... that will provide the basis for my final estimation of their success in the course. In this respect, students learn to both respect the value of well-formulated positions but are also simultaneously encouraged to try to make such positions their own.

As I frequently tell my students: Once you express an idea, *you own it!*

Last but not least, I feel that one of the “intangibles” frequently unmentioned in statements of this kind is the need to bring *energy* and *enthusiasm* to one’s teaching. This does not mean that students must be “entertained,” but that it’s vital to share your own *personal investment* in your subject matter if you want your students to engage on more than a perfunctory level. Learning is one of the most personal activities an individual can participate in ... especially when doing so is challenging enough to lead to feelings of confusion or inadequacy. So making that final effort to inject your own personhood into your teaching ... even at the risk of causing a little “embarrassment” to yourself ... can mean the difference between cranking out dutiful learners and inspiring independent thinkers. Exposing one’s deep and deeply personal interest in a topic is often a socially fraught activity, but doing so shows students that nobody ought to feel inhibited from exploring extraordinary interests or convictions. All new ideas run against the grain of conventional wisdom.

In summary, I would break down my pedagogical philosophy to the following:

- 1.) to model the methods by which concepts and theories are generated
- 2.) to do so in a way that illustrates rigor, intellectual honesty, and enthusiasm
- 3.) to ask my students to approach learning in the same way

2.) Lessons that Succeeded ... and Failed

I am, by nature, given to experimenting in my teaching, and, as such, have seen a fair share of unexpected outcomes. I cannot say I feel that any of them has “failed” outright... I owe it to my students to recuperate any experiments that seriously go awry ... but I have certainly instigated certain innovations that did not live up to their potential. To be honest, the biggest reason for this has usually been because I have under-thought the exercise, not anticipating how much more demanding or complicated some aspect of the exercise would be. This has sometimes been because I assumed the students would possess certain skills they did not; in other cases, it was because I planned more than could reasonably be accomplished.

One noteworthy “failure” that comes to mind was during my first time teaching a film history survey course. Thinking this would be an excellent opportunity to engage students on an active level and involve them in the “historiographic process,” I conceived of a final paper project that asked them to conduct original research using “primary sources,” instead of simply reiterating “factoids” found in existing, “secondary” histories. It was not until I received their final projects, however, that I realized a number of students were unprepared to deal with the

large amount of sorting and filtering that goes along with surveying large amounts of data. I also realized that many of them were not sufficiently clear about the difference between conventionally reliable “primary” and “secondary” sources and – in their desire to locate “solid” information – and to appear to have achieved a comparable level of *solidity* in their own presentations – were led to fall back on secondary sources, despite my instructions that they ought to be avoided.

I consider my students’ failings in these aspects to have been my own failing. Since the foundational ideas involved in the assignment seemed to “intuitive” to me, I assumed my students *already understood* the ideas and methods associated with primary, historical research and did not prepare them adequately to prosecute it. Certain, however, that a first-hand engagement with the historical research process – what I called “doing history” – would give my students a more dynamic and critical relationship with the study of history, I regrouped the next time I taught the course and created a core unit on “historiographic method” as well as on the sensibilities that underwrite the researching and writing of history. I also made their research process more visible by asking them to store data in Google Docs folders to which I had access, allowing me to gauge their progress and offer insights.

Given my perennial desire to explore new territory and try out new methods, I accept the fact that limited “failures” will continue to play a role in my teaching practice: even if I could come up with an “ideal” methodology, shifts in the skills and attitudes of new, incoming undergraduates would eventually send it off the rails. The best policy I believe one can adopt is to follow one’s intuitions and interests when it comes to trying out new material and exercises and to accept the fact that under-performance on the part of a significant number of students is always a sign of the fact that adjustments need to be made to your own teaching approach.

3.) Why Employ Teaching Technology and How Has It Affected My Teaching?

My own relationship with “educational technology” started with typewriters and overhead projectors, so in many ways I belong to that “older generation” that sees itself as trying perpetually to get “up to speed.” That said, having gone to graduate school later in life, I was immersed in an environment where digital learning and digital lifestyles were considered the norm. Although I doubt I’ll ever consider Facebook to be integral to my identity, I am, in truth something of an email addict; and I have, in the past few years, fallen in with that legion of people who text instead of picking up the phone. Digital technology isn’t hard to use, it turns out: it’s just that those of us who pre-date it developed different habits to solve similar problems.

In truth, until quite recently I resisted incorporating digital learning into my teaching practice, partially (like many, older people) because I didn’t have any compelling motivation to figure it out; but also based on a reasonable conviction that “analog” teaching still had “teeth.” My opinion in this respect has not entirely

changed – I do believe there are virtues to in-person learning that cannot be effectively replicated outside the classroom. But now that I have first-hand experience using digital tools, I can also say without reservation that digital teaching has proven to have merits I had not imagined before I began to use them.

My reason for deciding to engage with digital teaching arose from my decision to create an online course. The reason I did so was largely pragmatic: being aware that digital courses were becoming a conventional aspect of college curricula, I decided it was useful to my professional development to at least give it a go. To that end, I am grateful to the faculty of the College of Liberal Arts for supporting my initiative to create an online version of Introduction to Film, the Department of Film and Media's first and only online course. I am also grateful to FIT's Online Learning Office for having created a training program that taught me the fundamentals of online course design as well as giving me valuable exposure to the tools available on Blackboard.

Despite the extensive support I received, I confess I was not highly optimistic about either the efficacy or the pleasures of online teaching. Having developed a fairly dynamic in-class teaching practice, it was difficult to visualize how that would translate into a digital environment. It was important to me that my online students find the course both challenging and engaging, but I feared that some of the rigor and immediacy I was able to create in the classroom might get lost in translation.

While the transition to an online format *did* limit certain practices I had used successfully in the classroom, I quickly learned, however, that it also created new opportunities that were both pedagogically valuable and personally rewarding. The first of these was the more intensely personal communication online learning facilitated with my students. Having to respond to regular assignments online proved to be more of a “two-way street” than comments written on paper and instigated productive responses much more frequently than in my classroom practice. Additionally, the “burden” of having to articulate so much in writing in my online teaching guides... which I called (in quotes) “lectures” ... forced me to reexamine and refine many of my own claims in a way that positively impacted my teaching in the classroom as well. Additionally, the “time shifting” elements proved to be practical... both for me and for the students... and I also found that assigning shorter but more frequent response papers was not as burdensome as I'd imagined.

All in all, my first two experiences teaching Intro to Film online have greatly increased my esteem for what can be accomplished with online teaching technology. While I do not feel the frequent, written interactions I had with my students entirely compensated for the loss of actual, “embodied” interaction, I am certain my students walked away with a solid understanding of the subject matter and a personally focused educational experience as well. Additionally, the positive experiences I had engaging with my students on Blackboard inspired me to integrate Blackboard posting into my “real world” courses, an activity that has produced higher-quality responses than I had anticipated and which affords another means to interact with each of my students in a more personalized and pedagogically fruitful manner.

4.) What More Could I Be Doing?

Given what I have achieved to date, it seems like a good time to evaluate what I have accomplished and decide what additional efforts might be necessary to maximize on the resources made available to contemporary educators via digital learning tools.

I would like to outline three goals for future teaching:

- 1.) I would like to develop a more robust practice employing digital folders as a means of mentoring students through the process of gathering data for historical research work. This seems like an effective way to encourage students to invest more time in and to take the process of data collection more seriously; and, also, it would allow me to intervene and guide their research on a more regular basis.
- 2.) Despite the fact that I consider it a personal preference to comment on larger student “papers” using printed hardcopies, there is not reason not to explore doing so digitally. It would certainly save me from getting a sore hand and it’s entirely possible that the substance of my comments might change in a positive manner given the ability to respond online. There would certainly be more room for “re-writing” (it never looks good to scribble out comments written in pen), and, I suppose, it might inspire me to revisit and reconsider certain comments. If the goal of such comments is to help students become better thinkers and writers, then a device that might tend to improve your comments is obviously a good thing.
- 3.) Finally... although I admit to being somewhat more resistant to this than to the proposals above... I owe it to my students to experiment with Voicethread or similar technologies. To the extent that I am critical of wholesale efforts to replace actual classroom time with virtual substitutes (more about that below), I cannot rightfully criticize a practice I have not explored firsthand myself. As such, I will seriously search for a practical exercise that will allow me to explore its potential strengths.

5.) Where Is All of This Leading Us?

Expansion in the digital domain will certainly continue to play a role in global culture for the foreseeable future: it’s hard to imagine a world that will not continue to be obsessed with interconnectivity and the benefits deriving from it. As such, education will continue to be molded and influenced by developments in the digital domain, which, it is my hope, will continue to develop digital education as an adjunct to classroom education, streamlining some of the processes of traditional “analog” education without becoming a brute means of supplanting that process.

Digital teaching tools are an excellent way to circulate and update course information and to gather and access “deliverable” projects: although I still have a personal preference for commenting on expository writing assignments using a pen and printed “hardcopies,” I do not deny that digital commenting is just as effective.

Additionally, I have found that digital communication methods – either commenting through online learning systems or exchanging notes via email – has greatly expanded my ability to interact with students *individually*, setting up a dynamic difficult to achieve and schedule in traditional lecture courses particularly.

That having been said, I would say that the greatest drawback to these technologies arise in the case of fully digital, online courses. Despite the noteworthy efforts made to create tools like Voicethread that facilitate a type of interactivity mirroring the classroom experience, it is still my conviction that these experiences, although “parallel” in some respects, are not the same. There is an aspect to genuine, real world activity that immerses students in a situation that virtuality does not replicate. I also feel that an instructor’s ability to gauge and respond to the effectiveness of their teaching is somewhat limited by the many “blind spots” digital instruction introduces. While I can get a good sense whether or not the *content* of my courses has been communicated effectively, without embodied interaction with my students, it’s much harder to assess whether or not the *spirit* of the activity has been successfully communicated as well. There is an element to embodied interaction which abstract, virtual media of communication cannot entirely compensate up for; and which, I would argue, we abandon at a certain risk. Will people who have no experience interacting with or a perceived need to interact with other people in embodied situations have any sense for or desire for equitable social relations, for instance? At the risk of sounding alarmist, I see certain negative outcomes harbored in an excessive mediatization of education; and also feel that doing so would negate one of the most fundamental reasons young people have been going off to college (in certain nations) for hundreds of years: to “find” themselves as fully formed subjects and to make their way into the social arena. While tweeting and Facebook posts replicate a certain *frisson* of social integration, I would greatly worry for our culture were they to ultimately replace actual, real world social relations. Human beings are ultimately linked together through embodied interactions, not simply through the exchanges of texts and images.