

## TEACHING PHILOSOPHY

Media studies is a broad and multifaceted field marked by opposing critical and entertainment values, yet thoroughly encapsulated in daily life. Many students come to the field expecting it to either be a stepping-stone to professional experience or a “fun” class geared towards discussing the latest in popular culture and technology. With this in mind, I have three main objectives for their learning experiences: 1) to facilitate the appreciation for complex, big-picture issues inherent in processes of mediated communication, 2) to provide fundamental knowledge and tools applicable to students’ academic and future careers in media-related fields, and 3) to enhance critical self-awareness and understanding of the media and their impact on individuals and the world at large. One way I actualize these objectives is by creating a dedicated and engaged learning environment in which I take an active role in facilitating my students’ learning and engagement with the media. My pedagogy stems from sensitivity to students’ media interests and their skepticism both towards the media and critics who take them to task. My overarching goal for students is to think critically about their engagement with the media and understand the subsequent effects this engagement has on our individual, social, and cultural value systems.

I believe that students do not come to class as blank slates and often bring with them preconceived notions about the media. These preconceived notions may manifest into a lack of appreciation and understanding for the more historical and theoretical aspects of communication studies and research. Moreover, they may find it difficult to reconcile media effects and communication theory with the more professional orientations of their future careers. As a teacher and a researcher in media studies, it is important for me to acknowledge and disabuse them of the notion that the two aspects of the field are mutually exclusive. Therefore, one of my goals is to help students see the relevance of academic concepts to their own lives and to the field overall. In order for me to do this, and a favorite tool among my students, is to provide current media examples that help facilitate the deconstruction of complex concepts and theories, as well as make them more memorable and applicable to the students’ lives.

For example, one class assignment I asked students to create was an ideological analysis of a television text using Stuart Hall’s “Encoding/Decoding” reading classifications. To make my objectives for the assignment more transparent, I guided the students in an in-class evaluation of an episode of the sitcom *Everybody Hates Chris*. The screening, in conjunction with the course readings and informative group discussion, helped students further recognize and identify the multiple “readings” that one television episode could involve. In another course designed to examine the myriad effects that the media can have on our individual lives, I used a clip from the reality show *Beauty and the Geek* to emphasize the media’s impact on body image. In lieu of the more traditional body image examples (i.e., female body consciousness), this clip emphasized that women are not the only ones who can be body conscious. The clip showed men confused and at odds with their appearance and how it fails to live up to more masculine (and societal) standards.

Furthermore, I frequently use clips from YouTube and Hulu as both a discussion tool and an example of the changing digital media landscape. I believe that in using current and/or popular

media, students have been better able to grasp difficult concepts, remember the examples, and subsequently think about and apply abstract concepts more concretely. My own research draws heavily on pop culture texts, which keeps me immersed in current trends and relatable to many of my students and their own media interests. I believe that when students recognize their own values and interests being stimulated, they may feel a greater sense of commitment and ownership in the class, and thus more engaged in the learning process.

I also believe that students learn when they are exposed to different ways of understanding the course material and objectives. Reading, elaboration through lectures, student-led discussion of the material, and a presentation of diverse visual media all function as tools to help give every type of learner several ways to “get it.” I frequently use online collaborative learning sites (such as Course Tools or Blackboard) to facilitate classroom discussion. I also create PowerPoint slides that are easily accessible to students, as well as a source of reference material for them throughout the semester. Furthermore, I encourage and invite students to utilize their life experiences when engaging with the material and leave ten minutes in each class session for a “watercooler” discussion – even if that means discussing pop star Britney Spears and the trials of celebrity. The watercooler discussion paves the way for enlightened engagement and interactivity among the students, particularly when they have to interpret larger course concepts.

I prefer to use multiple avenues of student assessment including examinations, research papers, group projects, and short in-class writing assignments. While I do believe that the testing process is important to make sure that students comprehend the material, questions that simply ask students to recall facts without assessing them critically is not helpful. I strive to create short answer/essay test items that force students to analyze, synthesize, evaluate, and apply concepts learned throughout the course. For example, after viewing *Color Adjustment* and reading parts of *Enlightened Racism* and trade press reviews of *The Cosby Show*, one exam question asked students to synthesize and discuss the complexities (both positive and negative) surrounding the representation of African-Americans on television. Moreover, I take to heart that writing and communication skills are the basis of any good scholarship and future professional necessities. I place particular attention on my students’ ability to communicate their ideas effectively and efficiently through writing. Thus, my paper assignments offer students an opportunity to engross themselves in the material, formulate their own opinions, think critically and relationally about course concepts and theories, and, in the end, consolidate the cumulative aspects of the course.

The connection and energy established between my students and me is a powerful teaching technique that I utilize in creating an optimal learning experience. I view my role as the instructor as not only a source of knowledge, but also a source of support and an avenue for other resources. Students can expect that I am approachable, available to answer questions, and genuinely invested in their academic success. I strive to be student-focused, competent, flexible, and aware of uniqueness amongst my students. If I can help students see the relevance and the value in what they learn in class, the desire to learn and to be challenged would not be something forced upon them. Rather, as I have found through my teaching experiences, by modeling and instilling students with a sophisticated understanding of media processes and content, they can apply these to most any (media-related) circumstances. Once students are engaged and excited about the material, they will then begin to proactively ask questions, think critically, and search for connections and relevance on their own in the future.