

Taking Risks in Learning and Teaching: A Student-Faculty Dialogue about Intersectionality and Digital Narratives

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In Winter Quarter 2010, Samuel Beavers, then a senior majoring in Comparative Studies, enrolled in a class taught by Judy Tzu-Chun Wu, an Associate Professor of History and Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies. We subsequently presented about the experience of creating and teaching digital narratives for the Academy of Teaching Mini-Conference in the Spring of 2010. The following is a dialogue between us as we exchanged ideas and questions about how we approach the experience of learning and teaching as well as our reflections about creating digital narratives.

Sam: Why I chose to take a class labeled “Intersections: Race, Gender, and Sexuality” is an easy question for me to answer. Quite simply, it sounded very interesting. I am, and always have been, very interested in the cultural intersections of race, gender, and sexuality, as they are subjects that pervade our daily lives in often subtle, yet sometimes explicit, ways. I first became interested in these intersections in high school, when an intersection of race and seniority disrupted a few otherwise normal high school days. A fight broke out between a junior and a senior over which section of the benches was the senior's side and which was the junior's side. The fight was also between a white male and an African-American male. As soon as the latter fact was emphasized on the news, there was a “race situation” which meant posted police officers and lectures on tolerance and understanding. For the rest of my time in high school, there was a “junior bench,” a “senior bench,” and a “black bench.” This event has always stuck with me for its ability to elicit such an overreaction from the administration and the community.

Since then, I have taken a more careful look at how race, specifically racial stereotyping, affects daily interactions, and I began to realize that it is not just race that affects interactions but race and gender. I think films are a great place to study these interactions because they portray a real-life sequence of events, but in a very short time frame. Thus, oftentimes to make an abbreviated sequence of events seem more realistic, film directors will subtly make use of stereotypes. For my digital narrative, I took a critical look at a few sports films. I specifically examined sports films that rely heavily on African-American male stereotypes and involve a community coming together once the aforementioned African-American males demonstrate their talents on the sports field.

The harder question for me to answer regards my expectations for the class. I think it is more appropriate to say I had questions and fears about the class, rather than expectations. I wondered how the professor was going to approach a class with such broad and controversial topics. I was excited for the possibilities of class discussion, but I was also worried that discussion could get out of hand and become more destructive than productive. However, I also feared that professor concern over controversial discussion would lead to a dry and stale conversation. In retrospect, it is interesting to realize that class quality and usefulness was only partly dependent upon the teacher, but instead was largely dependent upon the students.

I do not intend to minimize the work and the extraordinary challenge Professor Wu faced by stewarding a conversation about these topics, but I do intend to say that if a class like this is to be useful, it should involve a large amount of student-originated thought and debate. Thus, my question to you, Professor Wu, is how did you prepare for this class and how were you able to keep the discussion focused, while also allowing for student-originated thought and debate?

Judy: Thanks for the frankness of your response and for your great questions, Sam. I was excited by the opportunity to teach the “Intersections” class during the winter of 2010. It was a new course for me, but like you, I’ve long thought about the interconnections between race, class, gender, sexuality, and other forms of social difference. I immigrated as a young child to the U.S. from Taiwan, and grew up in a “test-market” middle-America town in the Pacific Northwest. I always felt like an outsider. In college, I discovered ethnic studies, feminist studies, and other fields that explicitly analyzed how “difference” is socially constructed and often be-

comes the basis for shaping unequal access to social, economic, cultural, and political resources. Intersectionality is a key concept to understand how varying forms of social difference are not isolated or independent from one another. Instead, race, class, sexuality, gender, able-bodiedness and so on are operating simultaneously and mutually define one another.

I wanted to convey this concept through the readings, discussions, and assignments for our class. It is impossible, of course, for any course to cover its intended subject matter thoroughly. However, I wanted to introduce students to ideas and a method of analysis that they could utilize beyond the classroom, whether it is in their future course work, research projects, professional responsibilities, or daily lives. I believe that it is crucial for the learning process that students have a stake in the classroom. Consequently, my selection of readings and the format of the class reflect my goal of maximizing student involvement and engagement.

I chose readings that I thought would be provocative and unexpected. We began with some difficult theoretical pieces by legal scholar Kimberle Crenshaw, who is credited with coining the term *intersectionality*. We then read four books, each of which explored different manifestations of intersectionality. Joane Nagel offered a historical and sociological examination of the interconnections between race, ethnicity, and sex. Andrea Smith analyzed the relationship between indigeneity, colonialism, and sexual conquest. Susan Birch and Hannah Joyner co-authored a work on Junius Wilson, exploring how race, class, and disability affected the life of this African American man. And, finally Grace Chang looked at female immigrant laborers and their role as “disposable domestics” in the global economy. The students for this class were the most diverse that I have ever taught at OSU. Because the course is cross-listed between three departments (African American and African Studies, Comparative Studies, and Women’s Studies), the students tended to come from different intellectual as well as demographic backgrounds. Even with this diversity, however, there was something in the course that was bound to surprise and disturb the students.

I certainly did not want bland discussions that flattened the controversial issues or silenced the students’ genuine responses to the subject matter. Rather, I wanted to hear what you and other students had to say so that we might learn from one another. Consequently, I asked students to co-lead discussions so that they might pose questions that they wanted to explore and that other students might feel comfortable expressing their

opinions. I actually learned a great technique for fostering discussion by giving up “control” of the classroom. I really liked the exercise of having students physically relocate in the room based on their opinions of a controversial position. It allowed people to “vote” with their bodies, even if they did not always express their opinions verbally. I also asked that students do mini-presentations inspired by a topic related to the readings. I was so impressed with the quality of these presentations, which demonstrated how students were able to find creative connections to the subject matter that we were exploring in the class. I agree that discussions about controversial issues can be very tense, and we did have some of these moments in our class. However, I think we collectively developed a great rapport such that people began to feel comfortable disagreeing with one another. It is a unique ability to be able to address rather than avoid conflict. And, I believe it is this ability to confront difference that fosters true learning.

So, tell me about why you chose to create a digital narrative for your final project and how you think it compares to writing a traditional paper.

Sam: I chose to do a digital narrative for my final project instead of writing a paper for primarily practical considerations. I was outlining the paper and I realized I would have to attempt to describe the actions and details of scenes from the films I was using in order to best get my point across. Not only is it difficult to accurately describe a scene from a film, but the images from the films I was using were powerful, and really helped highlight my argument. As my work on the project progressed, I was very happy with my choice to produce a digital narrative because it became clear to me that the imagery of the film was actually the point. Most of the time, these films are not explicitly conveying racial stereotypes, in fact they are often claiming to be doing the opposite. However, the images they use convey racial stereotypes, sometimes explicitly and sometimes subtly, and that is what I wanted to show with this project.

There are many similarities between doing a digital narrative and writing a traditional paper, but there are also significant differences. The similarities lie primarily in the preparatory work. Doing research is a critical part of both. For example, one must find as many sources as one can and then narrow down these sources to the select few which will suit the argument best. Outlining is also an important part of each type of project, and perhaps even more important when recording a digital narrative as the delete key is not so easily pushed on a piece of recorded video. The ma-

major difference between the two, besides the obvious talking about instead of writing about one's research, is the time it takes to perfect the narrative. It is relatively easy and simple to proofread a paper a dozen times and construct each sentence exactly how one wants it, but it can be time consuming and difficult to perfect a digital narrative, especially if large sections must be re-recorded or technical problems are encountered. I had many late nights with my digital narrative and when screening day came, it still was not in perfect form. In fact, it was far from perfect.

Judy: I am so glad that you and other students in the class decided to do something outside of your comfort zone. For those who wrote papers, I asked that they also develop a visual exhibit so that they could share their work with other members of the class as well as with members of the OSU community who attended our end-of-quarter presentations. For those who created digital narratives, they had the opportunity to “premiere” them. I have offered these types of assignments in the past to encourage students to become “public intellectuals,” and I am always so thrilled to see what students produce. For digital narratives, the creators can utilize narration, storytelling, images, movies, music, and text. It gives students a broader palette of tools to convey what they want to communicate. Like papers, digital narratives also vary in quality. However, I think the process of engaging in this project teaches important skills about research, utilizing evidence, and communication. It can be frustrating to run into technical difficulties and to be limited by the available software or perhaps by our limited knowledge of the software. However, I hope that the attention to detail and the desire for perfection will help students become better thinkers and communicators. Since learning to create digital narratives myself, I believe I have become a better teacher and writer. I am much more aware of my audience and also more interested in being a storyteller as well as a scholar.

Thanks, Sam, for engaging with me in the class and in this dialogue. I hope that what you learned will stay with you as you enter law school and embark on a new career.

To view the digital narratives made by Sam Beaver, see:
<http://on.fb.me/eD9SnB>

To view the digital narratives made by Judy Wu, see:
“A Trip Down Immigration Lane”
<http://www.facebook.com/v/457086952835>

“Dr. Mom Chung of the Fair-Haired Bastards”
<http://www.facebook.com/v/417466287835>

“The Takeover: May 15, 1989”
www.facebook.com/v/417325787835

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