

Teaching Philosophy
Courtney A. Hoffman

My teaching reflects the possibilities of the challenge of being lost: lost in material, lost in thought, lost and finding a way through confusion to solutions that might not seem obvious. Essentially, I view the various states of being lost as a method by which students can blaze their own paths of discovery, both of self and of texts. The underpinnings of my philosophy stems from my research focus on letters. The flexibility and conventions of epistolarity can be translated to the classroom setting; for example, when discussing Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's *Turkish Embassy Letters* with a class, I demonstrated the somewhat precarious process of exchanging correspondence in the eighteenth century. Some letters were delivered. Others were "lost." Those that were lost emphasized the ways in which some letters might not arrive at their destinations, which reflects not only the realities of correspondence in the period, but also a reality of contemporary texts: information sometimes does not reach its intended audience. This activity, which uses specific contexts with a hands-on exercise to bring historical moments to students and engages them in lived experiences, illustrates how the concept of being lost can provoke critical thinking, facilitate problem-solving, generate discussion topics, and encourage students' participation in the classroom. I see myself as a cartographer, providing models of navigation for engaging with and constructing texts, both literary and multimodal.

In pursuit of expanding my students' abilities in critical thinking, I encourage students to think beyond the boundaries of our classroom. I therefore construct daily assignments that focus on skills that allow students to produce not only successful logical, evidence-based, thesis-driven arguments in essay form, but also multimodal artifacts that highlight their ability to communicate complex ideas. I challenge them to consider how cultural shifts may – or may not – affect relationships among individuals, among texts, and among social hierarchies, networks they will need to successfully navigate in an increasingly connected twenty-first-century world. With this goal in mind, in both my "Biomedical Innovation and the Question of Ethics" and "Birthday Suits: Materiality of the Body in the Eighteenth Century and Today" classes, I asked student to produce a short op-ed video. Students in my class mapped an argument about a topic of their choosing, searched for visual and audio components to complement the argument they wish to make, and produced an artifact that incorporates multiple modes of communication. While they are familiar with video as a medium, many have limited experience in making their own, and feel discomfort or a lack of confidence in their ability to replicate the mode. They are, in essence, lost. Anticipating this problem, I provided a map in the form of guidance in using the production software and classroom instruction to comprise a compass in the form of knowledge about the ways that the visual and the audio can produce meaning in conjunction with written or spoken text. Though students may have felt lost prior to beginning their videos, our joint exploration of the medium's affordances gave them the critical thinking and analytical skills to chart a path through the modes available in video allowed them to navigate unfamiliar waters in innovative ways.

Similarly, I encourage my students to become lost in the material we study; for example, in the process of creating a collaborative podcast episode based on current research being conducted at Georgia Tech in my "Biomedical Innovations" class, I asked students to consider their own interests in choosing a topic and to interview an expert in the field. Using the knowledge they gathered from their interviewee and the independent research they had conducted into their particular subject, they recorded, edited, and produced a 15-20 minute, orally-based, multimodal artifact in a style of their choosing. Each group also gave a multimodal presentation to the class, detailing the process they underwent in determining their subject

matter, finding an interview subject, learning how to organize and script a podcast, and intertwining speech with sound elements into a coherent whole. After getting a little lost in the subject matter, the students used skills developed through in-class exercises I designed with a focus on provoking analysis and argument about their chosen topics to map their final product and create a structured conversation. The drafting and revising exercises I required students to complete allowed them to construct and reconstruct the most effective organization for conveying what they deemed the important bits of knowledge they collected along their journey through oral communication, a mode they had not previously been asked to explore.

In designing assignments, I utilize a scaffolded structure, with clearly defined deliverables, to provide students with a cartography for the drafting and construction of their artifacts and essays. By allowing students to working through a mapped-out, overarching process, moving from concept to draft to revision to final artifact and reflection, I model a method for argument design that can be applied to literary analysis as well as transferred to students' other disciplines. Students can often feel lost at the prospect of producing a document or artifact that engages with an unfamiliar subject; my process of utilizing a structured, previously charted approach gives them steady footing and confidence in their ability to work through their discomfort to achieve the assigned end goals. In addition, I actively promote a classroom atmosphere where feeling lost or confusion is acceptable, so students can feel free to express any bewilderment. I usually begin class by asking what they thought of or what they learned from the reading assigned for the day to stimulate students' critical thinking processes. This question allows students to articulate rudimentary arguments, providing space to explore their own ideas and formulate new, more complex claims. In promoting an open, congenial environment where students can get lost, express dissent, and participate in debates with each other, I encourage my classes to discover new and diverse ways of thinking. A wide range of perspectives provoke the most interesting conversations and I make an effort to include every student in our discourse, as a new idea can lead to a fascinating path of discovery.

I also chart new avenues for students' critical thinking involving a focus on methods of communication outside of the classroom. Group projects that rely on effective digital communication to simulate real-life interaction shape expertise that can be applied to students' future careers. In my "Your Obedient Servant: The Movement of Information in the Age of Print Media and Beyond" class, students considered the historical contexts of several eighteenth-century scandals before constructing an argument to debate one side of the affair. Using various media such as posters, Twitter hashtags, stickers, buttons, and memes, their collaborative multimodal presentations married contemporary modes of communication with historical detail, comparing and contrasting methods for disseminating information then and now. Incorporating modern media with literary texts and historical contexts allows students to envision the paths by which society has evolved over the centuries, as well as to imagine future progress and how that might affect them – and how they might affect it. Though they may feel lost when asked to engage with eighteenth-century texts, the connections between earlier models and contemporary examples draw a map for exploring their own interactions with their environments. Once students realize that familiar texts produce cultural critique, they begin to examine other aspects of their lives through the same lens. The skills they demonstrate in analyzing and critiquing the familiar will transfer across disciplines, genres, and media, and can be applied not only in their academic careers, but in their lives beyond the classroom as well. The varied experiences students gain in my class provide a map for future success.