

2018-2019 UNCP Grant for Excellence in Teaching and Learning Award Final Report

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Background

Our grant was to develop and teach a co-taught special topic course entitled *Social Justice in Literature and Film*. It was proposed by interdisciplinary and collaborative faculty group from the Art Department (Dr. Naomi Lifschitz-Grant and Mr. Robb Epps) and English Department (Dr. Michael Berntsen). Our focus in developing this interdisciplinary course was to teach students digital video technologies, aspects of the cinematic creative processes, and elements of visual narratives, so they could learn to cultivate their intellectual curiosity and develop digital content meaningful to them. The intention for this course was to examine texts and films with a social justice perspective and explore how artists use creative mediums in order to inspire positive change within their communities. At the culmination of the course we had hoped to host a film screening of the student films that were created as a result of this course. Below, we will discuss this grant's implementation and impact as well as our subsequent growth as researchers and scholars as a result of our collaboration.

Grant Implementation

After initially receiving funding for this Grant in Spring, 2018, our faculty cohort tried to recruit students to enroll in the course for Fall, 2019. Unfortunately, because advisement and registration for Fall 2018 had passed by the time we received grant notification, we could not get enough student enrollment to run the course. We received an extension and offered the class in Spring, 2019, which provided us with ample time to plan and advertise our course. In Fall 2018, we met several times to plan the class, create a course schedule, and select texts and films. Afterwards, we ordered digital video equipment that students would need to develop their own films for this class. Finally, we began the preliminary planning of the screening, and selected a date and venue.

Unfortunately, we only had five students enroll in the class; however, it was enough to keep it running. As the course progressed, we met three times to discuss the course's implementation and students' progress. Around midterms, we determined that the student films would not be at a stage where they could be screened by the date that we had scheduled the screening. We, therefore, met with Dr. Robert Canida from the Office of Student Inclusion and Diversity and discussed partnering with them and screening the student films at the Annual Social Justice Symposium. With the change of leadership at the Office of Student Inclusion and Diversity, we are in the process of exploring alternative options since this event is now under different management and direction.

Assessment of the Grant Impact

With the Grant money the course received, we were able to purchase two DSLR cameras, camera support equipment, and sound recording equipment. This equipment enabled the course to include film production projects instead of only theory-based assignments. By being able to include production-based projects, the students were exposed to more kinesthetic learning situations along with the normal verbal and visual ones available in standard lecture classes. Students were introduced to production challenges such as scheduling shoots, finding and rehearsing with actors, lighting and live sound recording, editing, and rendering video files. These are experiences that they would not have if they only ended up writing scripts, or a similar activity without the grant supplied equipment.

The Grant money doubled the number of available cameras for the students to film their final projects (as the professors already had access to two similar DSLR cameras and their support equipment). The project for the second portion of the course was to come up with either a Social Justice Focused Documentary or to create a Social Justice themed story then film it. Students were introduced to film terminology, visual storytelling techniques, as well as the basic use of DSLR cameras, lighting, and sound recording equipment. The lighting equipment available to the students also had come from a previous purchase by the Art Department. Since the course time frame was set up as a lecture course, most filming had to be done outside of class meetings, which meant that students had the access to equipment outside of the classroom. This approach made a big impact on project outcomes since student would check out the cameras and take them to their chosen locations to film. Fortunately, the class size was not large so the purchased cameras, when added to existing departmental equipment, were able to cover the number of students who were enrolled in the course.

Regarding the sound recording aspect of video production, the class only had two small portable recorders and one Boom microphone to share between them. This small amount led to a reliance on the built-in microphones of the DSLR camera, which produced poorer sound quality in their projects. In future courses, we would hope for a larger class size which would then increase the need for more equipment so that all students can spend more time becoming familiar with the equipment and completing their projects.

These conclusions were gathered from instructor observation, informal and formal student evaluations, equipment check-out lists, and the review and critique of produced films. Three out of the five students in the course were able to create completed films, and, thus, met the basic goals of the course. Concepts for the films dealt with issues involving smoking and the dangers of second-hand smoke, transphobia, kidnapping/human trafficking, and mental illness. Our hopes in the future are to increase the quality of the completed projects. One method we believe would aid in this goal would be to have the students produce a shorter project more within the confines of class meetings before tackling a larger project of their own.

Reflecting on Our Growth as Teachers and Scholars

Our goal in merging literature, art, and film was to design a social justice themed course that would have general education students engage with literary texts and documentaries then create their own visual narratives that exhibit one social justice theme. We thought that this theme would contribute to student interest in social action and would serve as a venue to explore the needs of local and global communities. This focus also coincides with UNCP's core values statement since UNCP is committed to serving the local region and to guide students to be stewards of the world.

Our biggest success in the course concerned student engagement with this topic. The students enjoyed examining and evaluating the documentaries, films, and literary texts, such as *Freakonomics*, *They Live*, and Ray Nelson's "Eight O'clock in the Morning" because they covered numerous issues, including racism, poverty, political corruption, cheating in competitive sports, and the role of religion within cultures. The in-class discussions, homework, and essay assignments revealed the students' interest in social justice topics and passion to change unjust systems. The variety of cultural artifacts covered in the course further offered students to examine problems through different perspectives and approaches, which did not present a challenge to the students who ranged from majors in Art and Mass Communication. They effectively analyzed all the works assigned in the course, suggesting that the topic matters to all types of students.

However, when came time to create their own visual narratives, we encountered unexpected anxieties with the creative process. Thinking that the students would enjoy the chance to make their own films, we designed the course for the final projects to be showcased at the first ever student-run film festival on our campus. Despite having both instructors discuss production techniques throughout the course, the students delayed the creation of their visual narratives with one student even admitting during a class session that the whole process intimidated her. The students' hesitations and anxieties demonstrate that a theoretical understanding of terminology does not provide confidence in their own abilities. Even when we had students complete exercises to demonstrate their understanding of the Rule of Thirds, dynamic and static compositions, and storyboarding, they lacked the self-assurance to move beyond the planning stage. Our experiences suggest that student engagement rests not on their sense of understanding of the material, but on their sense of comfort with the material. Since their final projects were artifacts to be consumed by a public audience rather than simply evaluated by instructors, students had a simultaneous eagerness to share their stories, yet a trepidation in realizing that these projects would be at the mercy of a wider audience. Composing any narrative, whether it be a visual essay, a documentary, a digital, multimedia text, and beyond, presents a challenge for students and different challenges for instructors. Guiding student understanding of vocabulary and process must be built upon a foundation that takes into account the internal pressures experienced by students as they navigate multimodal approaches to creating and composing their narratives.

Our plan is to discuss our experience at the Conference on College Composition and Communication in 2020. Robert Epps and Michael Berntsen have submitted the abstract, "Students' Excitement in Sharing Visual Narratives and Their Anxieties in Creating Them," and are awaiting the outcome. We also plan submitting abstracts to other conferences, such as The Lilly Conference on Innovative and Effective Teaching or The Teaching Professor Annual Conference. We think that discussing our findings and experiences with this course at conferences will solidify our hypothesis concerning student successes and delays within the course. Afterwards, we will aim to compose a publishable article and submit to a variety of pedagogically focused journals, such as the *Journal of Curriculum and Pedagogy*, *Journal of Educational Research*, or *New Directions for Higher Education*.

We would like to teach this again with a more technique focused design, in which we have them compose numerous short documentaries rather than have one final project. This approach should alleviate the fear of public scrutiny. Another aim is to invite colleagues and other students to view their mid-semester work so they can interact with a viewing audience.

These adjustments should provide a stronger willingness to showcase their original material in a film festival environment.