

Who's at the Wheel?: When the Sage on the Stage Takes a Backseat to Electronic and Student-Chosen Content in the Television Classroom

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Teaching television studies in the new millennium has its challenges and perks. On the one hand, viewing habits and the content viewed are more splintered than ever before. On the other hand, we as teachers have more open access to shows, students, and industry folks than in the even recent past. Shifts in technology have opened up spaces for us to bring television and the television industry to our students in a variety of ways. Many of these shifts can aid in providing a sense of increased agency to students within the classroom. A question I seem to repeatedly ask myself is “how much agency do they want/can they handle.” As a professor, I’ve often thought that giving students the freedom to explore and discover—rather than roping them into what I think is most important—would not only be academically useful but desirable on the part of the student. I’m often shocked and dismayed at the resistance to choice demonstrated by students. As teaching styles and technology make student choice increasingly doable, where do we find a happy medium and how do we encourage them to snatch up such choices?

Last year I began teaching History of Television and Radio fully online at DePaul University. This shift in modality allowed for a number of innovations to what had been my longtime face-to-face class. Many of these changes have allowed for flexibility in student interaction with each other and with television content. Aside from (hopefully) engaging with the readings, posted screenings, and online lectures, students use online resources to explore television content, lineups, and popular press reviews from various periods. In one version of the class, we used synchronous online classrooms to discuss pre-recorded interviews I had conducted with folks from the television industry (e.g. Jack McBrayer [actor, *30 Rock*], Lennon Parham [writer/producer/actress, *Best Friends Forever & Playing House*], Elizabeth Klaviter [producer, *Private Practice* & writer, *Grey’s Anatomy*]). For these brief moments, scheduled around students’ availabilities, class members and I would connect real-life experiences of industry folks to the topics covered virtually through recorded lectures, screenings, etc. Using audio, video, a side text thread, and on-the-fly or pre-chosen Internet sites, we could further explore connections between the interviews and class content. Discussions were largely built around questions posed by students prior to the meeting.

Throughout the process of building and tweaking the online history class, I have received mixed reviews from students: great class, too much work, I love what I discovered on my own, too much of a time commitment, not enough analysis, etc. I find myself struggling to wrangle in the potential offerings for this class into a format that both suits the course’s learning objective-related demands and the individual styles and needs of the students. Much like students who find very

open-ended paper topics overpoweringly frustrating, I have found the potential of online television courses in 2015 a bit overwhelming. Some days I think I yearn for the ease and comfort of the “sage on the stage,” yet I continue to push myself away from that model. How do today’s television professors simultaneously tap into the wealth of content available at students’ fingertips and channel it into productive learning? Even more complicated, how do online instructors allow for increased choice inside the virtual classroom, while still being able to productively respond to such choices in the online forum? After all, unlike teaching face-to-face, the online classroom demands much of the groundwork—lectures, assignments, tutorials, clips, etc.—to be chosen, solidified, and available from day one. It’s much harder to make substantive changes on the fly. How do the instructors of the new millennium balance student choice—which is good for both students and faculty—with the day-to-day grind of producing content and helping to share knowledge and encourage thought? In my case, only continued trial and error and increased student and instructor comfort with online learning will likely answer some of these questions. That said, these are not just questions for the online classroom. As the face-to-face or hybrid classroom becomes more and more reliant on student and professor interaction with online content, we must continue to negotiate this slippery slope of agency, overwhelming choice, and excessive content.