

Teaching & Technology in Media Studies

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The proliferation of digital teaching tools is frequently heralded as an opportunity to prepare students for the 21st-century workplace. Implicit in this coupling is a belief that digitally produced communication (when done well) successfully addresses large or “general” audiences with the kind of clarity, precision, and tone appropriate to professional spheres. What happens when digital tools are used in the service of decidedly “academic” pursuits, such as producing highly specialized, complex, and/or historically/theoretically driven analyses of texts/media that many would deem esoteric? Are there digital tools that facilitate the production of “difficult” work—or, can all digital tools be wielded to this end? Can we envision uses for digital teaching tools that might complement, challenge, or subvert the current focus on their promise for workplace readiness and productivity?

As our roles are recast or re-directed towards preparing or even “training” students for future careers, many university instructors/professors are being asked to imagine workplaces they’ve never or only briefly inhabited and to pretend expertise of those realms’ requisite skills. This seems not only disingenuous, but also dismissive of the expertise and habits of mind that scholars develop through years of immersive study conducted with a mix of more traditional research methods/tools and digital technology. If there is one thing I do know for sure about contemporary working life, both non-academic and academic, it is that it is increasingly dominated—thanks in no small part to digital technology—by distraction, fragmentation, and multi-tasking. In this environment, I would argue that the university—and especially film, television, and media studies courses—stand to offer students the opportunity to use digital technology to ends very different from those most often touted in discourses of professionalization. For example, I’m particularly interested in figuring out ways to use digital technology to spark students’ sustained yet critical absorption in texts and media that they may initially find difficult, inaccessible, or even alienating in their difference. Such projects need not be construed as opposed to the development of more prosaic workplace skills; indeed, cultivating different capacities for attention and critique may amount to a desperately needed survival skill both in and outside the neoliberal academy.

Since I began teaching three years ago, I’ve been experimenting with digitally updating the practice of film analysis as it is traditionally realized in the shot-by-shot analysis. In courses ranging from Disney to genre films, global cinema to eco-cinema, I’ve taught students how to use the media-annotation software Mediathread, first to break down and analyze film form, and then to craft evidence-driven argumentative essays. The meticulous work of annotation cuts two ways: it can break the seductive thrall of absorbing films (Disney animation, classical Hollywood) and it can open lines of inquiry into films made in modes or traditions (observational documentary, foreign-language art cinema) that many students initially find impenetrable. I’ve written in more extensive, technical detail about the affordances of Mediathread [here](#). Suffice it to say here that the value of these projects tends to manifest itself first in students’ expressions of frustrated disbelief that they have spent so much time watching their chosen film, and later in my experience reading their essays, which more often than not contain remarkable critical insights into those films.

Having this far used digital annotation tools exclusively to facilitate written film analysis, I’m eager to learn how other roundtable participants have applied digital tools to teaching television, and particularly how they’ve used digital technology to bring close reading to bear on expansive, long-running series. Likewise, I wonder if others have had success using digital tools to aid reading—particularly reading sophisticated theoretical texts.

I've dabbled with collaboratively annotating articles using Medium, but with mostly lackluster results thus far.