

## **CMM 4810- Digital Storytelling**



[Class Schedule](#) | [Assignments](#)

**Instructor: Dr. Stephanie Brown**

**Email: [stephanie.brown@slu.edu](mailto:stephanie.brown@slu.edu)**

*When should you e-mail me?* If you have a quick question that you've already attempted to figure out on Blackboard, the syllabus, by asking a classmate, or by asking me in class. If you have an extensive question, come to a help session or e-mail me to set up an alternate appointment. If you e-mail me after 5, I will likely not get back to you until the following day.

**Office: Xavier 302**

**Study/Chat Sessions: Monday 11-1 | Tuesday 9-10:50 | Wednesday by appt**

*When should I come to a session?* Literally any time! You do not need to be struggling or confused to take advantage of help sessions, though that is a great reason to come. You can come to chat about a concept you're interested in, go over a confusing reading, to brainstorm projects, or just to chat. I love to talk to students one-on-one, and students who come see me in office hours tend to do much better in the class than those who do not. You can give me a heads up that you're coming, or you can just drop in!

**Class Meeting Times: Tuesday/Thursday -3:45-5:00 Xavier Hall 207**

### **Course Description**

In its most literal interpretation digital storytelling is the practice of using computer-based tools to tell stories. Digital storytelling can incorporate a mixture of images, text, sound, audio narration, video and/or music. As an intellectual practice digital storytelling incorporates extensive research, interviewing, critical analysis, and production methods. As a social and cultural practice digital storytelling is a way to learn about and represent the narratives existing within various communities. This course involves employing the key skills needed to create a digital story: (1) qualitative research methods, (2) narrative writing, (3) critical thinking and (4) digital production.

In this course, students explore the practical and theoretical components of cultural reporting and storytelling. As a class we will analyze written, audio, video and cinematic approaches to storytelling. Through this process we will consider varying perspectives

on the interpretation and representation of cultural experience. Theoretical components of the course will address modes of ethnographic research, cultural studies approaches to meaning making processes, and issues of aesthetics in cultural representations. As a culmination of the research process (theoretical and practical) students will produce three short format and one long(er) format digital story projects.

### **Course Objectives**

- To understand the timeline of the storytelling tradition – oral, written and digital.
- To become familiar with the theoretical, epistemological, and historical underpinnings of documentary studies/cultural reporting.
- To understand how stories give meaning and shape to our lives.
- To learn how to study and understand cultural difference through observation, encounters and storytelling.
- To learn advanced qualitative, specifically ethnographic, research skills.
- To learn how to use various tools in the production of digital stories.

### **Required Texts**

Available at the SLU bookstore, Amazon, Barnes, and Noble, and various other online outlets.

- Able, Jessica: *Out on the Wire*
- Artis, Anthony: *The Shut up and Shoot Documentary Guide*
- Berger, John: *Ways of Seeing*
- Curran Bernard, Shelia: *Documentary Storytelling*
- Makagon, Daniel and Mark Neumann: *Recording Culture*
- Sontag, Susan: *On Photography*

All additional course readings will be available through Blackboard or online.

### **What Is Expected of Me In This Class? What Should I Expect of the Instructor?**

#### **Academic Integrity**

*Academic integrity is honest, truthful and responsible conduct in all academic endeavors.* The mission of Saint Louis University is "the pursuit of truth for the greater glory of God and for the service of humanity." Accordingly, all acts of falsehood demean and compromise the corporate endeavors of teaching, research, health care, and community service via which SLU embodies its mission. The University strives to prepare students for lives of personal and professional integrity, and therefore regards all breaches of academic integrity as matters of serious concern.

The governing University-level Academic Integrity Policy was adopted in Spring 2015, and can be accessed on the Provost's Office website at:

[https://www.slu.edu/provost/policies/academic-and-course/policy\\_academic-integrity\\_6-26-2015.pdf](https://www.slu.edu/provost/policies/academic-and-course/policy_academic-integrity_6-26-2015.pdf).

Additionally, each SLU College, School, and Center has adopted its own academic integrity policies, available on their respective websites. All SLU students are expected to know and abide by these policies, which detail definitions of violations, processes for reporting violations, sanctions, and appeals. Please direct questions about any facet of academic integrity to your faculty, the chair of the department of your academic program, or the Dean/Director of the College, School or Center in which your program is housed.

### ***Changes to the Syllabus***

Syllabi often need to change based on the needs of the class, so do not consider this syllabus or schedule set in stone. I will announce changes to the syllabus in class and via Blackboard announcements. This means you need to be in class and you need to regularly check your e-mail. You are responsible for keeping up with announced changes to the syllabus.

### ***Discussion and Respect***

The course addresses not just production and storytelling, but also power, identity, representation, and community. This means that you may be asked to critique things you love and challenge beliefs you hold.

Up front, I want to say that I respect your opinions and beliefs, but expect you to be able to engage with ideas that may be uncomfortable in a respectful manner. You are free to agree or disagree with the theories in this course, but you are to do so in a way that thoughtfully considers and engages with the material. That being said, **I will not tolerate** offensive, hateful, or malicious language as a difference of opinion. While this class is a space to grow, learn, and make mistakes, the humanity and rights of people is not a topic up for debate in this class.

Because the stories we watch and tell are a major part of our identity and lived experience, there is also a tendency to want to generalize our experiences as universal. Therefore, throughout the semester, whenever you find yourself wanting to use your own experience as proof or evidence, make sure that you're only making an argument about your experience and grounding your argument in theory from the course material. I also expect you to accept and listen to others' experiences, believe them, and understand that they may differ from our own.

### ***Grade Disputes and Rewrites***

Blackboard is finicky. At times, I make a small error or calculation in the grade book. In these cases, please politely alert me via e-mail as soon as possible so that I may fix your grade. You are responsible for checking that your grades are accurate in a timely manner.

In the cases of grade disputes, 24 hours after receiving a grade, if you genuinely feel you deserve a higher grade, please submit to me via e-mail the details of the discrepancy

and your argument for why you believe you have earned a higher grade. This paperwork does not guarantee alterations to your grade.

If you agree with the grade, but would like the chance to earn a higher grade, 24 hours after receiving the grade and after closely reading my feedback, please submit to me your intent to revise the assignment with your plan for revision, referencing the feedback you have received. Only those who have turned in work on time and have put in good faith effort the first time will be allowed to revise work.

### ***E-Mail***

I will send updates and announcements via e-mail, therefore you are responsible for checking your SLU email **at least once per day**. Not seeing an e-mail announcement from me does not constitute an acceptable excuse.

College is about learning to be professional, and that includes learning to send professional e-mails. Following these guidelines is part of this education:

1. Include CMM4810 in the subject line
2. Always start your e-mail with an appropriate greeting.  
YES: Dear/Hello Dr. Brown  
NO: hi /what's up?/hey prof
3. Let me know what you need, what you've already done to try to solve the problem, and possible solutions.

For example: If you can't find a reading online, tell me what you've already done to figure it out yourself-- like asked a classmate, asked a librarian etc. If you haven't at least done some legwork, I'm less inclined to help you, especially if your problem can be solved with a simple Google search.

4. If you have an issue that requires extensive explanation or discussion, please e-mail to set up an office hours meeting.

### ***Assignments and Late Work***

You will get 3 "grace passes" at the start of the semester to use as you see fit. Each are good for one day of penalty-free late work. You can use them all at once or one at a time. Once you use up your grace passes, late work will be subject to a 10% point deduction per day. In other words, if your work is 1 minute late, you'll be deducted 10%, if it's 24 hours and one minute late, 20% etc. You can turn unused grace passes at the end of the semester for extra credit (1 grace pass = 3 points on your lowest assignment grade)

### ***Extra Credit***

Do your work well and come talk to me in office hours if you're struggling. I won't offer

extra credit other than the grace passes and the opportunity to revise work you aren't proud of.

### ***Feedback and Evaluation of Assignments***

Timely feedback on assignments is needed in order to assure that students are aware of their progress. For routine assignments, feedback will be provided within one week after the due date, provided that students have submitted work in class on the day it was due. For longer assignments and major projects, feedback will be provided within 2 weeks after the due date of the assignment. In the event that these deadlines cannot be met, students will be informed of the delay and the extra time needed in providing quality feedback.

### **What Kind of Technology Will We Be Using?**

#### ***External Hard-drives***

It is highly recommended that students own an [external hard-drive](#) (available on **Amazon, at Target, Apple, Best Buy etc**). A flash drive (thumb nail drive) will not, in most cases, provide the storage necessary for the material you will produce in this class. Students who do not own hard-drives run the risk of losing course material and always having to work from the same computer station (because "saving" occurs locally). It is the student's responsibility to ensure the safe and responsible backing-up of all material. If, at any point in the semester, you lose material, you will not be excused from submitting an assignment. Failure to turn in an assignment, for any reason, will result in a zero for the assignment. Be cautious with your digital material. Back-up frequently.

#### ***Digital Equipment***

In this course you will be required to use recording equipment and computer technology. Recording equipment can be checked out from the Department of Communication, or you may use your own. The only requirement is that you must be able to transfer your recorded material to a computer, edit the material, and subsequently save and upload the project in the correct file format. In other words, if you use your own equipment you must have the resources to transfer the recorded data to a computer and edit material in a way that renders a product to be submitted at various points during the semester.

Equipment may be checked out from the [Communication Media Center](#). It is your responsibility to ensure that you are prepared with the material you need when you need it. At the same time, you cannot expect that the items you need, will be there for you at the last minute. Plan ahead; if you know you need a recorder or camera check it out a day early. It is never an acceptable excuse to blame the media center for your

failure to be prepared. It is not a requirement for this course to have technical skills, but it is a requirement for you to be willing/interested in learning production skills and to understand that this process takes time and attention and that you will not learn *everything* in this one semester. You will learn enough skills to produce a digital story.

Regardless if you have used recording technology and/or equipment in the past or not, it is useful to remember that technology, recording equipment and/or hardware and software **will** crash, batteries **will** die, wires will not work or you plug them in their wrong place, and on and on. There will always be an issue and the only things that you can do to recover from these setbacks are to backup your work frequently, be prepared and rehearsed with equipment, start your projects early, and have a good sense of humor and do not expect to work without some setbacks.

### **What Do I Do If I Need Help?**

#### ***Title IX***

Saint Louis University and its faculty are committed to supporting our students and seeking an environment that is free of bias, discrimination, and harassment. If you have encountered any form of sexual misconduct (e.g. sexual assault, sexual harassment, stalking, domestic or dating violence), we encourage you to report this to the University. If you speak with a faculty member about an incident of misconduct, ***that faculty member must notify SLU's Title IX coordinator***, Anna R. Kratky (DuBourg Hall, room 36; [akratky@slu.edu](mailto:akratky@slu.edu); 314-977-3886) and share the basic facts of your experience with her. The Title IX coordinator will then be available to assist you in understanding all of your options and in connecting you with all possible resources on and off campus.

If you wish to speak with a confidential source, you may contact the counselors at the University Counseling Center at 314-977-TALK. To view SLU's sexual misconduct policy and for resources, please visit the following web addresses: [www.slu.edu/here4you](http://www.slu.edu/here4you) and <https://www.slu.edu/general-counsel>.

#### **Learning Accessibility**

I recognize that accessibility is not limited to documented needs and accommodations.

**If you have documentation** from Saint Louis University's Disability Services office, please provide me with the paperwork during the first week of class. If you need to contact the Disability Services office, you can reach them at 314-977-8885, by visiting the Student Success Center, Suite 331 in the Busch Student Center, or by visiting <http://www.slu.edu/x30727.xml>. Confidentiality will be observed in all inquiries.

**If you don't have documentation** but want to discuss any accessibility concerns, questions, or issues **please set up a time to meet with me** to discuss how I can help to

meet your learning needs and goals. You can also see our website for partial list of academic, personal, and health resources.

Additionally, if you are ever struggling with the class **for any reason**, including but not limited to personal crises, mental health struggles, or food/housing insecurity - please let me know. Even if you don't feel comfortable coming to me with specifics, at least let me know if something is going on that is or will affect your ability to keep up with the class. I am more than happy to work with you on a plan for you to keep up with the class and to direct you toward resources that can help.

### ***Student Success Center***

In recognition that people learn in a variety of ways and that learning is influenced by multiple factors (e.g., prior experience, study skills, learning disability), resources to support student success are available on campus. The Student Success Center assists students with academic-related services and is located in the Busch Student Center (Suite, 331). Students can visit <https://www.slu.edu/life-at-slu/student-success-center/> to learn more about tutoring services, university writing services, disability services, and academic coaching.

### ***University Writing Services***

Students are encouraged to take advantage of University Writing Services in the Student Success Center; getting feedback benefits writers at all skill levels. Trained writing consultants can help with writing projects, multimedia projects, and oral presentations. University Writing Services offers one-on-one consultations that address everything from brainstorming and developing ideas to crafting strong sentences and documenting sources. For more information, visit <https://www.slu.edu/life-at-slu/student-success-center/> or call the Student Success Center at 314-977-3484.

### ***Basic Needs Security***

Students in personal or academic distress and/or who may be specifically experiencing challenges such as securing food or difficulty navigating campus resources, and who believe this may affect their performance in the course, are encouraged to contact the Dean of Students Office ([deanofstudents@slu.edu](mailto:deanofstudents@slu.edu) or 314-977-9378) for support.

Furthermore, please notify the instructor if you are comfortable in doing so, as this will enable them to assist you with finding the resources you may need.

## **Grading and Assignments**

### **Readings**

Readings for this class are **not optional**. While I often have to give incentives for my 100 level students to read, I expect students at a 400 level to read without needing to be repeatedly reminded. Readings constitute the best preparation for participating in class discussion and completing every aspect of the course projects. You are expected to complete readings in a thoughtful and critical manner so that we may have engaging discussion in class. It is also expected that the course material will frame, or be incorporated in some way into, your final project. Students who do not engage with readings through in-class participation or through assignments will not do well in this course.

### **Written Assignments**

All work must be double-spaced, use a 12-point font, and have one-inch margins and must adhere to APA, MLA, or Chicago style. Writing will be evaluated for sophistication of analysis, clarity, and effort.

### **Copyright**

For any assignment you may draw from original work you have produced in this class (written, visual and/or aural). Because we aim to make work for public distribution if you use work created by someone else (still image, moving image, sound — ambient and/or music) it must be copyright free, in the public domain, fall under [Creative Commons](#) and properly credited in your project, or you must obtain the rights. The exception is if you're drawing on copyrighted material that falls under Fair Use guidelines ([found here](#)). We'll discuss copyright in class, and if you ever have a question about it, please come talk to me.

If you are using work from another course or created for another project (including your thesis or applied project) you must notify me as well as the faculty/supervisor of the other project (it will require the approval of both to be able to use the work).

### **Participation and other Assignments (15%)**

Throughout the semester, I may give you practice assignments, and in-class exercises. This grade will also be based on professionalism, including showing up to class on time, doing the reading assignments, being engaged with the discussion question for the week, and actively contributing to class discussion.

### **Major Projects (65%)**

#### **1. [Audio Documentary \(15%\)](#)**

This 36-hour documentary assignment will generate a three to four-minute audio documentary that features (1) at least two interviews, (2) ambient sound, (3) narration, (4) music. Projects will focus on a cultural activity, unique location, or



interesting group that can be studied in the 36-hour time frame. Individuals or groups (no more than three) will work together to record interviews, sounds, write narration, and edit the final piece. The objective of the assignment is to produce an audio documentary that tells a culturally relevant and meaningful story about a place, person/group of people, or activity. A full description of the project, as well as the other project “constraints” will be provided.

## **2. Photo Documentary (20%)**

This 10-15 page photo essay must feature (1) at least 10 images and (2) at least 750 -1000 words of text. Individual students or groups of two students will pick a cultural activity, unique location, or interesting group that can be photographed and where participant-observation is welcome. The objective of the assignment is to produce a visual essay that tells a culturally relevant and meaningful story about a place, person/group of people, or activity. More details and samples will be provided in class.

Samples of past photo essays can be found [here](#)!

## **3. Video Documentary (25%)**

The final project topic is left to the discretion of each student, but in most cases the video documentary will be an extension of one or both of the other documentary projects produced during the semester (audio documentary and/or photo essay). Students are encouraged to draw upon material from current course projects, projects conducted in other classes, or thesis/dissertation research.

Students can work in pairs or individually. A group of two will receive the same grade for the project.

The details of the project (format, content, length, group/individual, etc) will be negotiated between the student and the instructor, but it is reasonable to consider the final project as a 3-5 minute video documentary, using a combination of (1) at least one interview, (2) b-roll (video or photography), and (3) narration (either verbal or text).

Students will provide an overview of the project in the Project Treatment (described below) and will receive feedback from the instructor regarding the details of the project. The objective of the assignment is to produce a video documentary that tells a culturally relevant and meaningful story about a place, person/group of people, or activity.

### ***Final Project Treatment***

Each individual/group will submit a “Final Project Treatment” describing, in detail, your final project. A treatment is a one-page statement about a project that reviews the details of the work, from conception to completion. It is

necessary to have your topic chosen and to have conducted preliminary research before you write a treatment. A treatment is not a proposal, it is a clear statement of purpose and should only be written after significant research has been conducted. While a project will always change/grow/morph throughout the process it is necessary to have a sense of what you are doing before you start.

### **Reading/Assignment Schedule**

All readings are due to be completed for the day they are listed in the syllabus. You should have access to your readings or notes on the readings in class and available for class discussion. Each week in class I'll give you a question to respond to by drawing on the readings for the following class. You don't have to produce or turn in anything formal, but should come to class with notes on the question and ready to discuss your answer in class.

Links and the internet can be fickle - if a link every doesn't work or is broken, alert me **ASAP** so I can repost the reading elsewhere. It is your responsibility to let me know if you can't access any class materials.

**A page of additional resources can be found here: [Resources!](#)**

This includes places to find music and images for your projects, examples of student work, examples of professional work, and additional reading on digital storytelling.

### ***Section I: Storytelling and Researching Culture***

#### **Week 1 – Introduction to Digital Storytelling and the Study of Culture**

1/15 – 1/17

Intro to the class and each other.

#### **Read for Thursday**

Question: What is the importance of storytelling to journalism VS social science research? Does prioritizing storytelling ignore or overshadow other important dimensions of these practices?

Gans: [Sociology and Journalism](#)

Azees and Marshall: [Why newsrooms need anthropologists](#)

#### **Week 2 – Interpreting and Researching Culture**

1/22-1/24

#### **Read:**

Question: How do these theorists define culture and how do they posit we systematically study it?

[Geertz: Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture](#) (pages 3-30)

Carey: [A Cultural Approach to Communication](#) (1-17)

### **Week 3 – Storytelling and/As Research Method**

1/29-1/31

#### **Read:**

Denzin and Lincoln: [Introduction: The Discipline and Practice of Qualitative Research](#)

Maggio: [The Anthropology of Storytelling](#)

## ***Section II: Audio Documentary***

### **Week 4 – Writing and Recording Culture**

2/5-2/7

**Read:** Makagon and Neumann: *Recording Culture* (Introduction and Ch 1)

Able: *Out on a Wire* (Ch 1, 2 and 3)

**Review sites** (Google around and listen to some stories):

DocumentaryWorks; Soundportraits; Storycorps; *This American Life*; *Radio Lab*; Radio Exchange, Third Coast Audio Festival, *Reply All*, *Believed*, *Slow Burn*

**In Class:** Assign Short Audio Documentary Project

### **Week 5 – Telling Stories for Radio**

2/12-2/14

**Read:** Able: *Out on the Wire* (Ch 4, 5 and Epilogue)

Makagon and Neumann: *Recording Culture* (Ch 2 and 3)

**Listen:** [Witness to an Execution](#), [The Sunshine Hotel](#), [Act V](#) and 5 short stories (3-4 minute pieces) of your choice from the [Third Coast Audio Festival](#)

**Watch:** Ira Glass on Storytelling ([parts 1 – 4](#))

**Thursday:** Final story workshop, work in groups to assign roles and create production schedule

### **Week 6 – Interviewing and Capturing the Story**

2/19-2/21

#### **Read:**

[Hearing Voices: Interviewing 3.0](#)

[Dave Isay's TED Talk on founding Storycorps](#)

[Transom - Interview Basics](#)

**Do:** Go through [Adobe Audition Tutorial](#) or [Audacity Tutorial](#) or find a tutorial of any audio editing software you may want to use!

**Thursday: Guest Lecture**

**Week 7 – Recreating a Place through Sound**

2/26-2/28

**Read:**

Makagon and Gould: [Learning the City Through Stories](#)

Bernie Krause, [The Sound of a Damaged Habitat](#) (NYT Opinion Page)

[What a City's Soundscape Reveals About its Character](#) (City Lab)

(listen to the examples in the story as well)

**Thursday:** Play a snippet of your story for class feedback / give status updates to class

**Week 8 – Rough Cuts/ Project Finalization**

3/5-3/7

**\*\*\*March 8\*\*\***

**Due:** Audio Documentary (by 5 pm via Blackboard)

***Section III: Visual Documentary: Photography***

***----Spring Break-----***

**Homework over Break**

**Read/Review:** 5 or more photo essays on [Media Resources](#) page

**Do:** Take 10 pictures (you can use your phone if you'd like) on a related subject or theme.

Upload them as a PDF to blackboard by Thursday March 21st before class

**Week 9 – Ways of Seeing**

3/19-3/21

**Tuesday: Audio Doc Fest (with snacks)**

**Read for Thursday**

Berger: Chapters 1, 2, 3, 7

**Assign:** Photo Essay (Due Date: Monday, April 8 by 9 am on Blackboard)

**Week 10 – Susan Sontag**

3/26-3/28

**Read:** Sontag: *On Photography* (Ch. 1, 2 6)

## ***Section IV: Visual Documentary: Video***

### **Week 11 – Representation: Politics and Practice**

4/2-4/4

#### **Read:**

Aufderheide, Patricia (2007). *Documentary Film: A Very Short Introduction*. Chapter 1: Defining the Documentary (available as an e-book through SLU's library website).

**Watch:** [My Dead Dad's Porno Tapes](#) | [10 Meter Tower](#)

And at least **3 others** Op-Ed Docs from *The New York Times*  
(<http://www.nytimes.com/video/op-docs>)

**Thursday: Documentary pitches and assigning roles**

**\*\*April 8\*\***

**Due:** Photo Essay by 9 am as a PDF via Blackboard

### **Week 12 –Storytelling and Evidence in Documentaries**

4/9-4/11

#### **Read:**

[Hampe, Barry \*Making Documentary Films\*.](#)

Curran Bernard: Part I: Chapter 1 – Chapter 6 (pg. 13-87)

### **Week 13 – Interviews**

4/16 (*No class Thursday 4/18*)

#### **Read:**

Artis: Chapter 7 (Interview Prep) and Chapter 8 (Conducting Interviews)

### **Week 14 – Documentary Production**

4/23-4/25

**Read:** Curran Bernard: Part III (Shooting and Editing) – Chapter 12 – 15 (pg. 175-235)

Anthony Artis: Chapters 2 and 3 and “Composition Basics” pg. 218-240;

## ***Section IV: Final Projects***

### **Week 15 – Final Projects**

4/30-5/2

**Work on project in and out of class**

### **Week 16 - Finals Week**

**Screening!**

**Tuesday 4:00 PM**

