

"It Don't Mean a Thing, If It Ain't Got That Swing"

Reflections on teaching a jazz history video production course

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It seems the most satisfying and rewarding times I have as a professor are when I step out of my comfort zone and enter someone else's area of expertise. Those collaborations are richly rewarding and memorable for both me and, I hope, for the students.

I was lucky enough to teach an "Inquiry Seminar" course utilizing a jazz history database at Worcester Polytechnic Institute (WPI) in the Winter 2017 term. The course, *Jazz History Database (JHDB)*, has been taught for many years by Professor Rich Falco, Director of Jazz Studies at WPI. His insight, passion, leadership and hard work have made this database a "go to" source for all things jazz in New England. As the website states, "The Jazz History Database is an interactive multimedia museum focused on artists deserving of wider recognition and dedicated to the preservation of "at-risk" jazz artifacts." The database includes a focus on primary source materials with an emphasis on data showing signs of deterioration." The JHDB really focuses on the rich "regional" culture of jazz, including many artists who were not nationally known, so their stories may not have been deemed "important" enough to be preserved. This project does just that—important work, especially as time passes. As the database has been expanded it has gained an increasing amount of national and international interest. Through the JHDB, the rich history of jazz continues to be saved and shared with educators and jazz lovers all over the world.

Teaching the course also brought together elements of my own background, both in teaching video/film/audio production, and popular and jazz music history, and also in my longstanding passion for archival research and interviewing, which recently culminated in my co-authored book *A Treasury of Rhode Island Jazz & Swing Musicians* (Consortium Press)

In his course, Prof. Falco would use the course assignments to both expand the database and teach students the importance of music archiving. Students videotaped him interviewing jazz musicians, authors, musicologists, and people connected with the local Central Massachusetts jazz scene, both old and new. They would then digitize these interviews and upload them to the database. They would also be responsible for digitizing everything from 1/4-inch audiotapes, albums, cassettes and CDs, photographs, newspaper clippings, etc.

Prof. Falco and I had many meetings at local diners to strategize ways to use all the materials on the database in a more "creative" way. Since I am currently finishing up a documentary about the first integrated jazz club in New England, *Do It Man: The Story of The Celebrity Club*, I felt students could learn how to "tell stories" through using materials in the database to bring some of these jazz artists to life. This spin on his course would not only help to teach students both video production and story telling skills, but build more interest in the website as well.

In my version of the course, students would now be accessing the jazz database to cull materials in order to produce short videos telling a story about various jazz figures featured on the site. We decided the class would be broken down into five teams of three

students each. Each team would be assigned a figure from the JHDB to produce a short (3-5min) video telling their "story."

These figures included old and new artists; Joe Zupan (WICN Jazz radio host & drummer), Boots Mussuli (a Milford, MA native and sax player, who also brought many jazz artists to local venues in Central MA.), Paul Broadnaux (a local pianist), Linda Dagnello (a local jazz singer/artist) and Jaki Byard (an internationally known pianist).

Students from any major could enroll in the course to fulfill their "Inquiry Seminar" requirement, so the members of the class had varied backgrounds and interests in music history, jazz, and video production. Therefore, it was important to try and "level the playing field" so all teams had equal experience (or lack thereof). I found most students were somewhat experienced in putting together a video, either by themselves or with friends. Our lab at WPI had many options to edit, including the two we settled on. Students could edit their projects using either FinalCutPro OR IMOVIE.

The class as a whole met once a week to present their work for that week, and teams met with me once a week to discuss team progress, problems, etc. Students found both meetings helpful, and class members did a nice job of helping each other out with both praise and problems. While storytelling is a very subjective thing, it was an interesting process with both meetings to keep students on track. Overall, they were highly motivated and saw the value in this seminar from the get-go. WPI values "real life" projects and the chance to preserve local jazz history hit home with many of the students. As one student eval said:

I felt that this project had more real world impact than many other humanities seminars would have due to the connection with the database. Instead of

simply writing a paper or doing some performance, I was able to play a part, however small, in saving history before it is lost forever.

One of the toughest aspects of teaching this seminar was, with a very short turn-around, to open students' eyes to the importance of pre-production work. Explaining that doing the research, writing a production treatment, a script & storyboards *BEFORE* doing the actual editing was critical to the success of the project is a difficult concept for students to wrap their heads around. It took constant communication and encouragement from me to the teams to keep their energy level and focus directed on the correct process to ensure success in their projects. Students don't usually see this until much later, and I didn't have the luxury of time that I would have in a regular semester length course.

The required weekly student journal (which some of them felt was valuable and others felt was just busy work) helped me keep track of where teams were, both with their work and with their interpersonal communication among team members. Students also were required to set up team emails (I was included in each team email listserv) to communicate everything from meeting places, to times, to struggles and changes in the productions. This also helped me gauge how well each team was performing.

As with any new course I've ever taught in almost 30-years of teaching I learned much more than the students. Teaching this course made me realize how difficult it was to teach a team-based production course in a seven-week term. I had little time to explain to students the goals and objectives of this course or its importance. By contacting and meeting with students over the school break prior to the course I was able to jump right in from day one. So, a lot of the nuts and bolts of the course were already nailed down before to meeting as a class.

Luckily, WPI students learn early the importance of deadlines, communication with professors, and how to work in a team setting. This went a long way to the success of this course. I found some of my students really were energized by something they would normally not have exposure to if it weren't for this inquiry seminar. As one student wrote:

This HUA seminar has given me exposure to a lot of local jazz artists especially Linda Dagnello. Even though they are not very famous, their work is incredible and jazz enthusiasts should definitely experience it. This seminar gave me the opportunity to learn about their lives which has resulted in a great appreciation for their work in me. After producing a video on Linda Dagnello, I have been amazed by how she uniquely connects her passions for jazz music and visual art and has produced amazing artwork which I would not have experienced if I was not a part of this HUA seminar. The exposure gained in this seminar will definitely retain my interest in this database and I would be happy to further help in the preservation of this amazing art.

I really enjoyed teaching this unusual course based on WPI's Jazz History Database. Working with materials already housed on the database gave me the opportunity to focus the class on editing and storytelling. The students brought a great deal of discipline, interest, and professionalism to the course, and we even had fun creating these projects. The fact that their work ended up on the JHDB was a plus for the students. They were very proud of their projects, and very proud their work was now a part of "New England jazz history."

The JHDB is a unique educational tool that is definitely worth checking out. There are great interviews, photos, stories and above all, music to enjoy and learn about. Here's a link to the JHDB: <https://jazzhistorydatabase.org/> and here's a link to an example of a student team production:

https://jazzhistorydatabase.org/contributions/single_view/Video/boots-mussuli-mini-documentary-47

[Editor's note: Dr. Shaker's syllabus for the Inquiry Seminar is available in our Resources section.]