TEACHING STATEMENT

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My teaching philosophy is to foster problem-solving, ethical storytellers who push technology and share information that changes society.

Sometimes that starts with a box of tissues.

After Spring 2014 graduation, I received a present from a student. Inside were 12, industrial-looking boxes of Kleenex, stacked neatly with a note:

"A gift to you because Professor Steven never had these when I needed them. Be encouraged. If he made you cry, he cares."

A present not directly to me, but to fellow Heels following in her tar-marked footprints. I carefully copied her note on the boxes and continue to pull them out on occasion.

While teaching is often a hard calling, a called student being molded and stretched to tears is equally so. Yet, sticking to my teaching philosophy through project-based learning is earning the results I press for, because I care.

"problem-solving..."

To create applicable projects, you have to start with the scent of a real-world, unsolved problem. Reese News Lab students zeroed in on one the entire journalism industry reels from: to make the government legislative process more transparent. Enter Capitol Hound.

Working in partnership with three students and colleague John Clark, I empowered the students to build the technology required to make the idea of creating search-and-alert transcripts workable. Taking audio recordings from state government legislative hearings, committee meetings and floor sessions, we developed an interface to enable searchability and set alerts for key topics. Decisions previously lost in the sea of mundane meeting conversation were now able to be filtered out and processed in pattern-tracking ways.

For example, a reporter assigned to the healthcare beat can know every time the world "healthcare" is mentioned in any hearing without having to attend the meeting. Each time the key word is mentioned, he or she receives an alert that links them to the transcript and audio file of that specific, topic-related timeframe of a particular meeting.

Today, media organizations across North Carolina are using these services and the project is generating revenue from lawyers and lobbyists who subscribe to the service. The service is then provided to media organizations for free because these private-sector customers off-set the cost (a break-even). A problem solved by empowered, supported students.

Because this wasn't a fictional classroom-generated project but continued to produce deeper-level problems to be resolved, students had to learn about server infrastructure, building a search engine and generating text alerts...all issues that went beyond the standard curriculum requirements. These roadblocks provided opportunities for me to leverage friends in the journalism industry who were experts in these niche areas. They provided technical advice to the empowered, problem-solving students who now have relationships with future employers.

"ethical storytellers..."

The devastating February 2015 shooting of three Chapel Hill college students set off not only a worldwide media circus, but a tightrope walk for journalistic ethics. As our students were emotionally impacted, they still had to grapple with real journalistic ethical questions: How do we show truth without bias? How do we frame a conversation on such a divisive issue? How do we interview victims' families?

Rather than just debate these questions in the classroom, UNC students envisioned a real-world project, "After the Shooting," to wrestle with them. Working with graduate and undergraduate students, along with colleague Chad Stevens, we juxtaposed the overarching issues surrounding the event with videoed dialogue between experts in unrelated fields. For example, a mental health expert sitting down with a gun rights activist. These stories were showcased through an interactive website built by the students (aftertheshooting.com).

Ethical shades of grey had a new meaning for students as they made hundreds of choices involving story placement, story framing, interview topics and promotion.

This is just one example of how project-based learning teaches ethical storytelling...or at least the reality of what needs to be considered for every project. Beyond projects, my students dialogue in the classroom about the most recent media ethics issues in the news cycle. News organizations like WRAL and *The Washington Post* now know we debate these questions, making our resulting social media tweets and posts news-worthy as part of the story's cycle of information. We have become part of the story we are debating.

When I showcase the latest ethical journalistic examples in class, my students are challenged. When I give them an opportunity to make those decisions for themselves, they are changed.

"who push technology..."

"Let's make an app for that" is a buzz phrase that sounds simple, but the ability to execute a user-friendly interface grappling with data to produce a niche application for an audience is not as simple as a click to download.

In Fall 2014, I pioneered a Mobile Apps class for the emerging market to prepare UNC students for the industry demand. The inaugural class was mostly journalism students, with a smattering of computer science and business students.

All 12 students successfully developed a design concept, executed the coding and interface design and deployed their apps to the Apple and Google play stores. Two of the 12 went beyond the classroom concepts, launching their own start-up businesses that together have generated more than $100,000 in investment capital. They are:

Roof.io: An application allowing roommates to share chores, bills and other household to do's, joining them together for a seamless household management system.

Friendli: An application focused on mobilizing people relating through social media networks to interact in real life.

The 2014 Mobile Apps class was a kickstarter for these young entrepreneurs, who continue to meet and consult with me as their ideas evolve. Their enthusiasm became the seeds for the Fall 2015 Mobile Apps class, which is maxed out at 18 students.

Adding to the class size doesn't sound too daunting, except that each student employs a different emerging technology to problem-solve their application vision. They push technology not just because I push them, but they are motivated to see their concepts become reality, whatever it takes.

"and share information..."

Interactive journalists may often employ numbers and symbols instead of the cyrillic letters favored by reporters, but the purpose is still the same: to analyze information and share it in a way that informs, entertains or motivates the consumer.

In my Intermediate Interactive Media class, students are tasked with using code to visualize data, creating a searchable, granular, personalized view of the data for an audience. Using the data.gov website, students honed in on a specific set of information that appealed to them from food security to bicycle deaths in North Carolina.

"Decoding" the food security data set led one student to provide local service organizations an interactive data dashboard detailing the needs of children suffering from food scarcity in Orange County. Another visualized the 2008 banking bail-out, enabling users to search for North Carolina banks specifically. Through this project, she developed a love for data. *The Wall Street Journal* hired her to continue sharing financial information for them.

"that changes society."

Nothing can prepare you for an African village greeting. The handshakes, dancing, singing and hugs in a small Malawian town in Spring 2015 was familiar to me from my professional travels, but to the 23 students in culturally-appropriate long skirts and pants with cameras at their sides, it was an experience they waded through looking to me for appropriate responses.

As the fanfare gave way to the ancient custom of speeches under the Banyan tree, I spoke of the importance of Story. I predicted for the villagers that our effort to tell their stories—through photos, video, written word and interactive graphics—would change their lives.

I didn't realize that this speech would directly impact an unintended audience...my students. Over the next 10 days they battled through jet lag, exhaustion, language barriers, culture shock and the pressure of deadlines to achieve excellence. It was a simulated but real-life exercise to produce a publication about the improved maternal health of Malawian women through the efforts of the CARE organization, which provided $80,000 in funding for the students and four faculty to achieve their mission.

The end result was not just a laudable, packaged website that continues to inspire donors and aid workers around the world. Students learned what it's like to tell stories in a culture that's not their own and the experience is a marker on their journalistic journey. One student was even asked to name the 12-hour-old baby of the mother she chronicled. Young William is forever impacted by the UNC documentary experience.

Malawi is just one example of a project-based learning experience that is changing society and changing students. On two Galapagos Island trips as a coach and development director, working with colleague Pat Davison, students went beyond iconic turtle watching. They created dynamic pieces about the environment, man's interaction with it and the great responsibility we have to such treasure. In Spring 2011, our team set about "Reframing Mexico" through the stories of Mexico City residents, providing a snapshot into a culture. Through each endeavor, we worked side-by-side with local residents and (in the case of Ecuador) with our UNC marine science department researchers in the area, extending our journalistic endeavors from within the university to the world.

Philosophy Blueprint

Knowing the destination of the teaching journey needs a blueprint, a roadmap to mark where each project-based learning experience is going for my students.

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<Start Loop>
        Define/Redefine problem
        Brainstorm solutions
        Involve users with human-centered design
        Build/Rebuild
        Test
        Execute
</End Loop>
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The impetus to continue this journey of data visualization and interactivity is often spurred on by opportunities to interact with real-world "news nerds," as my students call themselves. Traveling to conferences such as Online News Association annual meetings gives my students opportunities to showcase how different they are: a mix of storytelling with technological savvy. When I attended ONA 2014 in Chicago, *The Wall Street Journal's* director of interactive graphics requested a meeting to thank me for sending three great students to him in a trifecta of hires that year.

My goal as a professor is always to foster problem-solving, ethical storytellers who push technology and share information that changes society. This is accomplished each year whether I am giving drone-flying lessons in Malawi or providing introductions over hors d'oeuvres at conferences. More importantly, it happens every day coaching students in the classroom or doing live, critique-laden grading at my standing office desk...tissue box at the ready.