

## Teaching Statement | Ellen Simpson

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In my teaching practice, I emphasize an interdisciplinary approach focused on critical thinking, academic writing, and building the computational skills necessary for students to succeed in both their creative and entrepreneurial endeavors. After five years of teaching—as an instructor of record, a teaching assistant, and a mentor to junior colleagues—I look forward to building on this strong foundation of educational practice. I have experience teaching on topics such as social computing, user-centered design, and research methodologies. I also have experience in course development at both the graduate and undergraduate levels, as well as extensive experience in student mentoring. Below I outline my teaching philosophy and experience, followed by documenting my mentoring experience and teaching evaluations. Finally, I discuss my future plans as an educator and mentor.

### Teaching Philosophy

My classrooms are always abuzz with activity. I encourage students to learn through a mix of discussion and hands-on approaches because I believe that student and instructor experiences collectively construct a classroom environment and that sometimes doing is the best way to experience phenomena. Social justice and equity are key elements to my teaching goals, and, in taking this approach in the classroom, I endeavor to construct a learning environment that is both challenging and fun, where students have the opportunity to explore multiple perspectives on a similar topic.

In grounding my classroom in collective experience, I demonstrate to students how the world is socially constructed around us, and that where we sit within it matters for how and why we know things. For example, in *Online Communities*, an upper-division course I taught in Spring '23, I challenged students by assigning readings from the early days of online community research (e.g., the 1980s), presenting a very different online world than the experiences many of my students would have had in any part of their lives. I encourage and foster my students' creativity in my classrooms, asking students to imagine these older versions of the internet when applying concepts like participation, anonymity, and policy, and encourage students to use the Way Back Machine and other internet archival tools to explore what the online world was when these papers were being written. This assignment pushed students to consider a different social, cultural, and historical context than the one they live in, and to reflect critically on how the priorities around major course learning objectives may have shifted over time. Students in my courses are encouraged to leverage their prior knowledge, success, and failures to think critically and creatively about how technology shapes our lives while we also shape the technology around us through our use and understanding of it.

### Teaching Experience in the Classroom

Since starting my PhD in 2019, I have taught courses at both the introductory and advanced levels in information science. I served as the instructor of record in two courses with an average of 24 students, a TA in 6 courses with an average of 120 students, and a sole grader in 2 courses with an average of 40 students. I both served on and helped coordinate large teaching teams as a TA (e.g., 4+ people), as well as taught on smaller teams (e.g., as the only TA), and been an instructor of record. My experience in classroom types and sizes is as diverse as my experience in the classroom. I have taught introductory major courses, specialized upper-division courses, as well as mandatory upper-division courses for multiple majors (e.g., information science, communication, and computer science). I have taught large courses with 100 or more students, medium-sized courses

of 35-50 students, and small, 25-student, courses. I have also taught across multiple modalities: teaching in-person lectures and labs, hybrid in-person/remote courses, and completely online courses both synchronously and asynchronously. Finally, I have served on multiple occasions as a last-moment substitute lecturer or discussion leader in upper-division courses, demonstrating my ability to come into a classroom on short notice and adapt to the current lesson and classroom structure.

Beyond my experience in the classroom, I have developed my pedagogy and course development skills through formal training offered at both CU Boulder and Syracuse University. At CU Boulder, I completed the Inclusive and Engaged Pedagogy Workshop Series and also served as an ambassador for this program. I attended lectures on Queer, Antiracist, and Decolonial pedagogical perspectives, as well as workshops on collaborative learning, universal design for learning, and how to use storytelling to create a sense of belonging in the classroom for all students.

I put these lessons into practice by modifying the design of an upper-division course (3000 level) at CU Boulder, shifting from a lecture-driven approach to a discussion and activity-driven approach. I ensured that the class structure better balanced the time demands of students in their final semester at CU Boulder by restructuring the course to allow for alternative and independent assessment, creating more inclusive ways for students to complete the course through independent or group projects. Students gained the freedom to explore topics that interested them through personal reflection, small- and large-group discussions, and a personal reflection assignment designed to introduce students to each other and each other's interests, by documenting their communities online in creative ways aimed at drawing out the fun embedded into doing research about ourselves and our communities.

During my time at Syracuse University, I collaboratively developed two courses with teaching mentors and reworked the reading list for a third. Social justice and equity are key elements to my teaching goals, as evidenced by my course development. I reworked the course reading list for a required undergraduate course, Data and Society, in collaboration with my advisor, Dr. Bryan Semaan. We removed texts which focused on hegemonic norms of digital identity, shifting focus to topics that explored the boundaries of those norms and those most marginalized by society. To further this pedagogical goal, I worked with my colleague Dipto Das, and John Jordan, a professor of practice, to develop an undergraduate course on digital platforms. This course emphasized the interconnectedness of digital platforms in research; drawing from business, management, feminist media studies, information science, computer science, and human-computer interaction, to demonstrate the diverse ontologies of digital platforms. Collaboratively developing this course pushed me to think about how students prioritize information, and how to structure a social justice and equity-oriented course drawing on sometimes challenging literature at the undergraduate level. Additionally, I worked with Dr. Carsten Østerlund to develop a graduate-level course on field methods. Through this course design mentorship, I learned how to adjust from course development for undergraduates to consider the needs and abilities of graduate students. Here, I focused on course structure, and how to best introduce the variety of methods that fall under the broad category of "field methods," developing several drafts of a syllabus and reading list. This iterative process broadened my perspectives on how people learn and how to build from an existing base to expand knowledge at a graduate level.

### **Student Mentoring**

In addition to teaching in a variety of formats, I have also spent time working with undergraduate students and junior Ph.D. Students developing critical research skills. In my mentoring, I

emphasize that there is no one correct approach to answering questions, as everyone's unique experiences and life histories can provide important insights that are valuable to building a collective understanding and collaborative response to phenomena. In information science, students come to the table with a vast array of skills and epistemological commitments that shape how they approach the course and its learning outcomes. Teaching students to work collaboratively and draw on each other's diverse experiences and skill sets up students to achieve both in the classroom, as well as professionally. Further, emphasizing that there are many ways to answer any question allows students to embrace the potential for failure in their approach while broadening their thinking at the same time. Through discussion, illustration, mind-mapping, and creative individual and group projects, I push students to find balance, encouraging a mixed-methods style of research built on resilience, problem-solving, and collaborative, critical thinking that will help them achieve their professional goals.

This has translated into strong mentoring relationships with several students. At Syracuse University, I worked with Louisa Williams (current Ph.D. Student at Michigan) in developing her skills as a researcher, learning thematic content analysis and grounded theory approaches on Reddit Data; as well as navigating the hidden curriculum of getting into a Ph.D. program as a first-generation college student. I also worked with Andrew Hamann (current Ph.D. Student at UC Irvine) in doing interview analysis, taking his computer science skills to a more qualitative and design-oriented analytical approach through learning thematic analysis and applying existing theory to qualitative data. Having published papers with both Louisa and Andrew, I am beyond pleased to see them both blossom as they pursue graduate degrees and take their research ideas to new levels. At CU Boulder, I have taken an active role in mentoring junior Ph.D. Students, collaborating with Samantha Dalal to write a literature review, and mentoring her through the CHI rebuttal process on her first first author paper, dealing with conflicting feedback from reviewers and faculty advisors. I am excited to continue to grow in my capacity as a mentor to students and colleagues as an academic advisor or through encouraging student-driven research. I want to use my capacity as a mentor and educator to uplift student interests and encourage their academic exploration and curiosity.

### **Teaching Evaluations**

I am committed to teaching and mentorship excellence, which shows through in my teaching reviews from current students: "Ellen made staying on campus until 6 pm not unbearable, [but] actually enjoyable. She facilitates the most welcoming environment and builds connections with all her students." Making a difference in my student's education by inspiring them to pursue their exciting and challenging academic topics is a joy for me as an educator.

### **Future Plans**

Building on my teaching and mentoring experiences during my Ph.D., I plan to maintain an active research group where students can ask and explore research questions about how their identities relate to the use and design of different media and technology, how people express themselves creatively within a platformed environment, the impacts of technological tools like algorithms on societal function, and how people during times of disruption find resilience through their repurposing, repairing, and joining of disparate technologies to recreate normalcy in their lives.