audio essay assignment
learning & teaching through sound

"I think all good story telling and all good writing, if you tell the truth about your experience, it becomes universal…. The tape kind of talks to each other in ways that I didn't expect…. All of a sudden, we're talking to each other in different tracks—some of it is intentional and some of it just kinda happened"—Marlo, creator of "How to be a Girl" podcast (from interview with Rob Rosenthal, "A mom, a transgender daughter & a podcast," *HowSound* podcast)

Project Overview

▪ Your 8-10 minute audio essays will be shared, under a creative commons license, as part of an audio project called *The Learning Gene*, which explores the philosophy, science and drama of the classroom. Given how persuasive and "lively" abstractions can be, this is a real chance for you to develop your own voice and contribute your own analysis to public inquiry.

▪ It's an *excellent* idea to put your own first-person perspective into play in your audio essay: why did you choose *this* drama of "teaching and learning"? What is especially gripping or disturbing or wonderful about this drama? What do you hope to achieve in and through your own drama of teaching and learning?

▪ Here are the insights from audio-makers that underlie our project:

  o We only really *learn* about abstractions by creating them ourselves: "**The number one thing about learning is to do**: you have to do, you have to make. You have to do the thing." (Jessica Abel, *Tape* podcast, episode 30).

  o We stage our own claims to authority when we create audio: "**Radio is a peculiarly didactic medium**" (Ira Glass from *This American Life* podcast).

  o We learn so much more about our own abstractions when we try to convey them to others using sound: "Every sound you bring into your story is working together to create not just a story experience, but a musical experience, and the 'music' you're making can either serve or undermine the meaning of your story….Whenever I have a hard time deciding what music to use or where to put it, usually that means I don't really understand why I'm putting music there in the first place. **But a good reason tells me so much:** where it should be placed, what style it should be, what mood it needs to convey." (Jonathan Mitchell, "Using Music," *Transom.org*)

▪ Progress Report (mid-semester): you'll have 5 to 7 minutes to give the class a progress report. Consider it a pitch to the class, one in which you explain how you are *imagining the story* that you think you'd like to tell…. and you provide us with a sense of the tape (the audio) you plan to gather… and you give us a sense of the *drama of teaching and learning* that you'll be animating in your audio essay. It's an excellent idea to have a *super-short* audio clip to play for us (less than a minute), though this isn't required. You might give us a flavour of the sounds or the voices you intend to include.

To prepare for your progress reports:

<u>Listen</u>: *HowSound* podcast, "My Kingdom for some Structure" episode; *HowSound* podcast, "Writing Out of Tape" and "How not to write for radio" episodes

<u>Read</u>: Rob Rosenthal, "Imagining the Story," *Transom.org*

Technical Details & Resources

- We're using REAPER as the software for our project. A place to start is <u>Ada's prezi on "REAPER tutorials"</u> that provides an overview and introduction to audio editing in REAPER.

- To get going: start experimenting with very basic audio-editing! (Recording; deleting sections of tape; mixing sounds with vocals). Make sure to take notes when your recording! (where you are, the ambient sounds). And make double-sure to save your audio files before you start editing it.   Tips for recording: always **record as WAV files** (not mp3) to preserve sound quality. **Record at 16-bit, 44.1 kHz.**   If possible, record in **mono, not in stereo**.   Tips about sharing equipment: instead of removing the soundcard, use the USB connector to upload your audio files (and remove your files before you give the recorder to someone else).

- Make sure that you ask anyone you interview to fill out the permission form.

- Google drive: you and your group members should make a folder and share it with everyone in the group. You'll save your project and all of your audio files into this shared google drive folder.

  - Within your project folder, make at least one sub-folder for your "media" (this is where you'll upload all of your own original audio from your phones or your recorders)

- Some essential REAPER tips before you begin your project: <u>1.</u> In REAPER, under *options— preferences*—"Project": <u>check </u>the box "prompt to save on new project" and <u>check</u> the box "open properties on new project" and <u>check</u> the box "time stamp backup" (hit "apply" and "okay").

  When you are prompted to "Save as," make sure that you save your project into your main (shared) Project folder on Google drive!

  <u>2.</u> In REAPER, under *Project settings*—media: find "path to save media files" -- browse and find your own audio sub-folder on Google Drive

  <u>3.</u> Save these both as default project settings.

- Start looking for open access/ royalty-free sounds to incorporate! (Make a sound database for yourself or for your group). Remember that you'll need to save all audio files that you might or will incorporate into your audio essay in a *shared Google-drive folder that everyone in your group has access to*. Here are sites for finding music and usable sounds:

    - https://search.creativecommons.org
    - <u>http://freemusicarchive.org/</u>
    - <u>http://opsound.org/</u>
    - <u>http://www.freesound.org/</u>
    - <u>http://www.soundsnap.com/</u>
    - Royalty-free music: <u>http://incompetech.com/music/</u>

Script writing, recording & editing tips

Script writing tips:

- always have a script - write to your own voice - makes it sound more natural.

- don't use heavy academic language- your audio essay should be interesting and informative to people, the audience shouldn't have to work hard to understand. Think of it as a conversation.

- use short sentences in the active tense (this is how we actually speak in real life).

- assume your listener knows very little or nothing at all about your 'abstraction', explain things that aren't common knowledge, even if it seems a bit tedious.

- decide "who" you are as a narrator in your audio essay: are you an observer? Are you a participant in the unfolding drama? This will really shape your script.

- listen to your own script, once you've recorded it; it's likely that you'll want to rewrite some portions of it, now that you can hear which parts seem a bit clunky or unsmooth. This is a great way to work on editing your own writing!

- write *to your tape*: keep careful track of all of the recordings that you are making. Once you transcribe your tape, you'll begin to identify short segments that you will definitely want to include in your audio essay. Write your script *around* these bits of tape, providing context or commentary or simply setting it up.

> *Transcription options*

- it can be extremely useful to transcribe your own tape: as you listen to it, you'll tune into moments that are unexpectedly great or that hold real potential for your story. But here are some options if you're interested in finding help for transcribing your tape: *Pop Up Archive*; *VoiceBase*

Interviewing tips:

- set up your interview using good professional habits. Lay out your expectations to your interview subject in an email ahead of time ("we'll talk about this, or that"), describe what the project is ("I'm producing an audio essay for my Philosophy course"), and be very clear ("Just to confirm, we are meeting at *this* time, and I will not take up more than half an hour of your time").

- make sure there is as little noise as possible when you record the interview!!! Working in areas that are heavily ventilated, have a radio playing in the background, fridges that make noise, etc. Sometimes you can edit out the noise, but it just makes it so much harder to piece together. Audio can be so simple to edit if you have strong sound quality!

- always, **always record around 1.5 minutes of sound** from the space where you're interviewing. You'll use this later as a "soundbed" in your audio essay: if you need to edit out bits from your interview, you can use this soundbed tape to fill in the space. This is invaluable tape to have! Make sure you remember to get it.

- have everyone in your group say their names into the mic, and listen back. You can test the quality of the recording in that space, that way.

- also, if there are specific *sounds* in the location where you're recording, record them too! This might be great to incorporate as a sound effect in your audio essay.

- make sure that one person in your group is on 'line out,' which means listening to the recording, as it's happening, through headphones! This way you can really evaluate the sound quality of your tape, as it's being recorded.

--get your subject to introduce themselves in a full sentence. You may not end up using this tape, but it might end up being really useful.

- if your interviewee is nervous, get them to think of it as just a conversation between to people, because it really is!   Ask them anecdotes like, "Think of a story when….."   Ask questions like, "How did it feel? How did you react?"

- come with a list of questions to ask- makes you look and sound more prepared, of course if they tell you something and it's interesting you can follow up with an answer!

- it can be really easy to incorporate *movement* into your tape by asking them, "Can you describe where we are? What does it smell or feel like?"   Especially if you're recording a kind of "action" scene, ask your subject to describe the scene.

- it's a great idea to conclude by asking, "Is there anything else you'd like to mention?" Subjects can provide all kinds of surprising, wonderful tape in response to this open-ended question.

- be aware that your voice is recording too. Try not to talk over the person, "um" and "ah", instead you can nod to show that you are really listening (unless that is the style you're going for; then completely ignore this!)

- Also note! Don't touch any cords attached to your recording device when it's on because often times it can pick those sounds up.   (If you're using a handheld mic, it's a *great* idea to wrap the cord around your wrist twice: this will help you keep it nice and still and silent, minimizing cord noise).   -ALSO keep your phone on do not disturb !!! Recorders always manage to catch the dings and vibrate sounds of your phone

Recording your voice:

- stick your pinky and thumb out , pinky should be resting on the mic and your thumb should be at your lips - this is how far away from the mic you should be for the best audio.

-hold your mic a bit to the side in order to avoid "p"-pops   (this is an important tip!)

- bring lots of water! Try to avoid dairy products. Apple juice is excellent for improving your voice quality.

- even if you are by yourself, it could take multiple takes to get your voice right (this is totally normal!)

- Speak slowly, usually people tend to speak really quickly when the mic is on them, but just take a deep breath and go again.

Keeping Track of Files:

- make a list of all of your recordings. Perhaps rename the files so that they're really easy to find later. Make sure that you have saved *all of your tape and sound effects and music* in one folder:

this will be essential for when you are mixing and editing your project (especially if you're collaborating with others).

Framing your story:

- every good audio essay has a structure, and there are endless kinds of structures to use. Consider one of the most popular structures in radio storytelling:

1. the set up: explain to your listener what's at stake and a bit about what's coming
2. the point of no return: the journey has begun, and there's no turning back
3. destabilization: something *happens* that changes how the listener understands everything!
4. climax: the tension is resolved in some way
5. denouement: there's a reflection on the moral of the story

Mixing, Editing & Sound Design:

- set your scene *through sound*! (This is the wonderful challenge of audio: how to animate your ideas using "sound" itself). Make sure you're using tape from the soundbed of the locations where you've interviewed; search creative commons for sound effects that might dramatize your story scenes.

- research has shown that it's the *first 18 words* or the *first two minutes* that are key for listeners (they tend to stop listening after that point if they've lost interest). Do your best to use those first two minutes effectively!

-consider the pace and rhythm of your audio essay. (You might want to remove silences, or add in space, depending on how it is working).

- it might be really fun to explore the impact of voice processing on your tape. This is easy to experiment with in REAPER: for example, add a high pass (at 80hz), and a compressor, and an EQ. (there are hundreds of youtube tutorials about this, if you're interested in experimenting with voice processing).

Sound Quality:

- It's really important to "level" out the sound of your audio essay, once you've finished mixing and editing. Here's an excellent program to use, once you've rendered your essay (into an mp3): Auphonic (https://auphonic.com). You'll be able to upload your mp3 and have it leveled (it's free for 2 hours every month, so you'll be able to use it for free).