Transcript

Derek Bruff: [00:07] Welcome to "Leading Lines," a podcast from Vanderbilt University. I'm your host, Derek Bruff, Director of the Vanderbilt Center for Teaching.

[00:11] In this podcast, we explore creative, intentional and effective uses of technology to enhance student learning — uses that point the way that the future of educational technology in college and university settings.

[00:21] In this episode, I speak with LaTonya Trotter, assistant professor of sociology here at Vanderbilt. LaTonya is a medical sociologist, using ethnographic approaches to study how changes in the medical workplace alter how we think about illness and medical care.

[00:33] I met LaTonya last year when she was a participant in our junior faculty teaching fellows program. She had a lot of interest in educational technology and as I got to know her, I found her to be very thoughtful about her use of technology.

[00:46] As you'll hear in the interview, LaTonya selectively uses technology in ways closely aligned with her teaching and learning goals.

[00:51] [music]

Derek: [00:51] Welcome LaTonya to "Leading Lines." I'm excited to talk with you today.

LaTonya Trotter: [01:00] Thank you for having me.

Derek: [01:02] Can you start by telling us a little bit about who you are and what you do here at Vanderbilt?

LaTonya: [01:07] I'm a professor in the sociology department. I look at the intersection of sociology of medicine and social inequality. Really looking at how changes in how we

organize medical work affect the reproduction of economic inequality and racial inequality.

Derek: [01:35] What kind of courses do you teach here?

LaTonya: [01:37] I teach pretty much every semester my primary courses. I teach a course called Society and Medicine, which is essentially an introduction to the sociology of medicine.

[01:52] Taking students through thinking about the kinds of things that happen in healthcare, healthcare delivery, thinking about advances in medical knowledge and the ways in which those things are related to broader trends in social life.

Derek: [02:08] Can you give me an example of that? What's an idea or an example of that?

LaTonya: [02:13] One of the books that I always read in that class is a book by Elizabeth Armstrong. She really looks at the social construction of fetal alcohol syndrome.

[02:24] One of the reasons why I enjoy reading that book is because fetal alcohol syndrome is not a contested medical condition, right? Within healthcare, everyone believes that they know that is an actual syndrome related to mothers drinking alcohol while they're pregnant.

[02:46] Reading this book really takes them through a period of time in which we didn't have that kind of diagnosis. What are the kind of things that happen between not having that diagnosis and having that diagnosis?

[03:00] Looking at the ways in which we think of physicians and folks who're involved in clinical research as having these very set ways in which they go through research and peer review is a process that is always highly rigorous, but clinicians and researchers are human beings.

[03:23] [crosstalk]

LaTonya: [03:24] So, they often draw from things that are going on in the broader terrain. There were transformations happening in the way in which we thought about alcohol as being a wonderful social lubricant to having it be transformed into a social ill that were related to the construction of fetal alcohol syndrome.

[03:46] It's a really interesting book because it really challenges students to think about the relationship between broader trends going on in the social world and medical knowledge in a way that they hadn't thought of before.

Derek: [04:02] Do you have a lot of pre-med students in that type of course?

LaTonya: [04:06] I have a lot of pre-med students and a lot of pre-nursing students.

Derek: [04:09] So they're planning to go into a career, profession, where perhaps having this other way of looking at how knowledge is constructed and how their work is constructed could be really useful.

LaTonya: [04:23] Yes.

Derek: [04:24] Let's talk a little bit about how you use technology in that kind of class setting. What are some ways that you found to use technology either effectively or maybe some experiments that didn't quite work out?

LaTonya: [04:36] I started out this conversation by talking about one of the books that we read. There's ways in which I'm kind of like a traditionalist in terms of…

[04:42] Primarily, I organize my courses around the reading of books, which I think actually still has a role to play. I write books so I hope people are reading them, but also just for students I think that there is something really quite valuable in long-form reading and spending time with a topic.

[05:09] I also want my students not just to spend time in class taking in information that other people have read, but also producing some things that they share with other people, not just they share with me. One of the pieces of technology that I use in my classroom is really the use of a classroom blog where I ask students, 7 to 10 times depending on the course, to write about what are the things that they have gotten from the reading.

[05:43] The kinds of connections that they might make between the reading, and issues going on in the world — contemporary issues — or making connections to other books that we've read over the course of the semester.

[05:56] The reason why I like to use the blog is because it's public within the classroom because in another course that I teach called Medical Controversies, which is a sort of writing intensive course, I really…

[06:13] One of the conundrums that I had to work through was that students are so used to writing for a teacher.

[06:21] They write content to give to someone who gives them an evaluation and they get that evaluation back so they experience writing as being a private form of communication as opposed to thinking about it as a public communication, which in that course, where we are really focused on writing, I really want them to think about developing their voice for a larger audience than just some authority figure who's going to give them a grade on the thing that they write.

[06:49] For the blog, I thought, "Well, they could just write memos on pieces of paper and give them to me," but it still sets up that same dynamic, which is that they're trying to please me.

[07:00] I'm their only audience and the reason why I'm reading it is because I'm giving them a grade and so for the last couple of years, I've been using blogs in my classroom setting. Partly it's a way to just get students to write and think about the content, but I think there's something really powerful about them sharing their idea of a larger audience.

[07:22] In class discussion, they will often say… they'll often begin their comments by saying, "In my blog post, I wrote," and other people in the class will say, "Well I was reading so and so blog post then I think that…"

[07:35] It really gives them a sense that it gives them a concrete feeling that they're participating in the conversation. They're not just writing something because I told them they had to write it, but that their writing has value outside of the grading relationship between me and them.

Derek: [07:55] You mentioned a couple of examples of this already, but are there other ways in which you take what they do outside of class in the blog and build that into the class discussions or vice versa?

[08:05] I find that sometimes if the in-class and out of class are disassociated, then the out of class activities starts to feel busy work and not very useful so I'm wondering, are there other strategies you use to complete that loop?

LaTonya: [08:17] One of the things is just timing. The blog posts are due before class discussion.

[08:24] They're due six or seven hours before we meet for class so it gives other students an opportunity to read the blog posts before they come to class, but it also gives me an opportunity to read the blog posts before I come to class and to use them as a springboard for shaping the discussion, drawing people into the discussion.

[08:48] If I know that there are students who've written really interesting, brought up really interesting things in their blog post, then I can use that as a platform for beginning discussion. That's sometimes helpful too. One of the other things that you try to get students to do is participate in course discussion.

[09:07] Students have varying levels of comfortability with doing that so if I know that they have already thought about something, it's not deer in headlights, putting them on the spot.

[09:17] But I'm actually able to engage them in something that they have thought about. Then, it also gives me a way of engaging them more thoughtfully in the classroom discussion without them feeling like they're being put on the spot.

Derek: [09:30] There's still this piece where you are the reader. You are, but they also have each other as readers.

[09:40] I would agree that tends to be powerful. It feels more authentic often for students because they're not just doing this thing that you made up for them. They have their peers as an audience. Is your blog closed to the course?

LaTonya: [09:54] It is closed to the course.

Derek: [09:55] OK, so not public.

LaTonya: [09:56] It's not public.

Derek: [09:57] What's your thought on that choice because I can imagine situations where you might want to make it public, but you've chosen not to.

LaTonya: [10:05] I have chosen not to and it's partly just thinking about what it is that I want the blog to be about. One of the other reasons why I want students to write about the reading in process is really the sense that you can use writing as a way of thinking.

[10:33] It's not just about the polished thing at the end, but you often you can use writing as a way of thinking. I don't necessarily want to make the blog this thing that makes them focus more on the presentation and less about the ideas.

[10:54] I really want it to be a space where they bring up issues, where they ask questions, where they think through things for, maybe after we've come to class discussion, they'll come out of class having a different way of understanding the ideas.

[11:11] When I thought about what my pedagogical reasons were for having the blog and what it was that I wanted it to do, I thought it's not...I want it to be a reasonably well written piece of writing, but I don't want it to be a polished piece of writing.

[11:31] I think that that was the choice that I had made. I'm building towards thinking, though, about having a blog where finished assignments are posted to a public blog.

[11:50] That's something that I'm building towards because I'm always trying to close this loop between thinking of the classroom as a pretend space and thinking of the classroom as a real space.

[12:04] There are times when it's important to have pretend spaces, to have practice spaces, to have places where you try things out.

[12:13] But I also — you reference the idea of busy work — I also want them to sort of think about, Well, what are the connections between the kind of things we're practicing in class. And how might we actually sort of take these things that we've practiced and perfect them, and then put them out into the world?

[12:31] I haven't quite gotten there yet, but that is something that I'm moving towards.

Derek: [12:39] One of our earlier episodes we talked with Zolia LeBron, from our history department here. She talked about a time when she had students tweet in a course on the Arab Spring.

[12:51] One of her student's tweets had a hashtag, and it got picked up and retweeted a lot in Islamist circles.

[12:59] There were a lot of interesting pieces to that, but I think one thing that came out of that was it helped her students see a connection between the practice conversations they were having in this course, and actual communities out there, right?

[13:11] When I think of writing, you're writing for an audience typically. Having some public work, particularly if you have a community in mind that you'd like your students to join in some fashion. Then that I think can be a useful context in which to have them do something public. Are there other technologies that you've experimented with?

LaTonya: [13:40] I've been thinking about using podcasting, having students create podcasts. Part of it is me thinking about what my students might want, but then also me thinking about how can I challenge myself to better create spaces where students can do a wider variety of things. Because again, I started out this conversation by framing myself as being the traditionalist where we read books and write papers.

[14:10] Then I thought, "Well, for many of my students I think that learning to write a paper is really very useful, but I also think that they're moving into a world where they are being asked to use a broader set of media to be able to persuade people of things, to be able to produce content that communicate certain kind of things."

[14:36] Me really thinking about, well, how can I match my pedagogical commitments, which really are about long form and really are about people spending time and creating and crafting some things as opposed to something like short things, or sometimes I think there can be a way of using technologies in ways that are cute or ways that are fun.

[15:04] Which you know, who doesn't like fun, right? Everybody likes fun, but then thinking about the ways in which you can sort of push technology to do something other than something that is short and simply pleasurable, but that also does similar kinds of things to long form writing.

[15:23] In my classroom I've experimented just in terms of my content, and having them listen to podcasts to augment the things that we do in class.

[15:34] I made a particular decision to use podcasting as opposed to having them watch videos or films or something like that in class, in part because I think oral communication is still telling stories in a way that doesn't overwhelm the senses and that still allows space I think for...well, certainly film allows space for cognitive work, but I think it's harder.

[16:02] Sometimes when I've had students watch clips of video, there's ways in which they sort of sit back and watch in a different kind of way than when they're listening to something.

Derek: [16:12] Well, I think there's something about reading or listening where you're getting one stream of information coming at you, and you have to kind of make sense of it as you go, and you have to fill in a lot.

[16:28] I think sometimes when you're watching film or video there's so much coming at us that we don't have to necessarily fill in the gaps or connect the dots in the same way.

[16:41] Listening to a podcast is a little closer to reading a long form piece of text in that it requires a similar kind of attention, I think, in some ways.

[16:51] The podcast that you have your students listen to, are these ones that you create or you're finding things that are relevant and interesting?

LaTonya: [17:00] Yeah, I find things that are relevant and interesting. I rely very heavily on *This American Life* because it often deals with contemporary issues that my students are reading about.

[17:13] It gives them a way of having another narrative, another story that looks at a similar issue that they might have been reading about.

Derek: [17:25] When you have them...because I've actually played with this a little bit because I'm a big fan of podcast. I have a 45 minute commute so I listen to a lot of podcasts every week.

[17:34] I've started to use them a little bit with my own students most — well, in fact my

statistics course and my writing course.

[17:40] I haven't quite figured out how to build them in. If you give your students a podcast assignment versus a more traditional reading assignment, do you ask the same kinds of things of them? Do you ask different questions?

LaTonya: [17:57] I ask the same kinds of questions of them. The books we tend to read in my courses tend to be ethnography, so either from an anthropological tradition or a sociological tradition where a scholar is spending time in a particular area of social life and essentially collecting stories and watching behavior, right?

Derek: [18:24] Yeah.

LaTonya: [18:24] There are ways in which it matches onto a similar kind of storytelling that happens.

Derek: [18:29] Not all podcasts, but that kind of *This American Life* genre of podcast.

LaTonya: [18:34] It's very similar in terms of situating individual stories within a larger context.

Derek: [18:43] That's interesting because I think in my courses, my other readings aren't like that. They were like math textbooks so I can see why I need to think more about the kinds of questions you might ask your students about the reading or about the podcast.

[19:00] You mentioned putting your own content online publicly. Can you say a little bit more about that and what do you share publicly and why do you do that?

LaTonya: [19:08] I share my course content. I share syllabi. I share assignments online and partly, it's interesting to think about in all these universities all over the US and all over the world, you have people developing content that they treat as semi-private information.

Derek: [19:33] That's why I asked. There are faculty who would never share a syllabus publicly, right? They might not even share it with colleagues down the hall.

LaTonya: [19:43] Yeah. I think that there's something really important and valuable about

being able to share content with people. I often have, when I talk with friends and colleagues and they ask me about assignments, I go, "Well, here's a link to my website. You can go look at it."

"[19:59] Just see what the wording is it that I use and we can talk about it if you're interested why I did it at a certain way." And the other was just, too, practically speaking, have you ever been in your office and you're wanting to know something, do you go look for a piece of paper or do you go online?

[20:19] I would always have these moments when — it's a classic professors lament — students are asking you a million questions that are on the syllabus and you're just like, "You know that the answer to that is on the syllabus." I thought to myself, "OK, well."

"[20:33] One way of hearing or seeing that problem and to say, 'Oh, I just have this crazy, lazy student who just wouldn't read the syllabus,'" and I thought, "Well, it may be that the problem is me."

"[20:44] It may be that I'm giving my students' information that's really important for them to know in a way that is unnecessarily difficult for them to access."

[20:51] I know that for myself, I will Google things before I will look through a file to find a piece of paper.

[20:59] If it's online and publicly online, not a SCAG and a Blackboard universe where they have to log in, part of the logic is to make the syllabus a living, breathing part of the class.

[21:13] It also means that if there's something I want to correct, there's something I want to add, I can actually update it in real time instead of students whipping out their piece of paper and writing the change and the date of something in pen.

Derek: [21:26] Why not Blackboard or a course management system?

LaTonya: [21:32] I'm not sure I have the best answer to that question except for myself, having to go through an extra layer of logging in makes me not want to do something.

Derek: [21:51] Sure.

LaTonya: [21:52] It just makes me not want to do it and it's not the way that I organize the rest of anything else I do.

[21:58] We use information these days in a way in which it is freely and easily available. I mean, Google. Sometimes you forget how amazing Google is. You can put in what is it? Plain language when you basically just ask it a question in whatever language you want.

Derek: [22:17] Right. Not even search terms, but you just ask the question for your exact question and it will interpolate.

LaTonya: [22:21] Which part of what it does that make things easy to find, but also it takes away all the barriers that we used to have to information.

[22:30] I think that my students... I sometimes imagine that my students are very much like me. If I have to go log into a system to find information out, I might not do it, especially if I can just ask the person standing in the front of the classroom.

Derek: [22:45] Are there technologies that you've decided aren't a good fit for your courses?

LaTonya: [22:53] I think that there are technologies that have a lot more immediacy to them like tweeting, which full disclosure, I don't really tweet or use Twitter so it may just be that I'm less comfortable with those things. But when I think about what it is I don't want my student to do in class...I think there's number ways of thinking about technology.

[23:16] Sometimes you want to meet students where they are and so if they're using technology in a particular way, you want to, as best as you can, enter into that world. But then there are other times where I think that there's some value in getting students to do the thing that they're not doing in their world.

[23:36] It's one of the reasons why I still cling to books. It's one of the reasons why in my classroom...This is a podcast about technology, but I ban technology from my classes.

Derek: [23:47] I was wondering about that.

LaTonya: [23:47] In part because I think that one of the things that technology does is it allows people to be multiple places and I really want my students to be in my class when

they're in my class.

[24:02] Even when my class is boring and even when they would rather distract themselves by being in some other, alternate space, we're going to sit in this class for however long the class is and be here in that particular moment and so I have decided against technologies that are short and immediate.

[24:25] I sometimes have students who raise their hand and say, "I have a question. Can I get on my laptop and look up the answer to the question right now?"

[24:35] I say, "No. You can look it up outside of class though, and really think about it. Think about what are the best places to get the answer to this question."

[24:44] How do I think about the hits to the answer to this question that I get and how do I make sense of this in a way that makes sense?

[24:56] There's sort of like immediacy, I think is something that students are really used to. This idea that you want to find something out, you just go look at that right now.

Derek: [25:06] Right and you have an answer right away.

LaTonya: [25:09] Right away. If you want to communicate something, you communicate it right away. I purposely want to create a space in my class where I'm asking them to do something different than that.

Derek: [25:24] It sounds like it connects to your goals about engaging students in long form thinking, long form reading, that you're not asking questions that have short answers.

[25:33] You're asking questions that have complicated answers that require some intense thought and research and time to work through that.

[25:42] That makes a lot of sense. Also, the other piece about the class as a learning community. You want them to be present for each other and so that's part of shaping that classroom environment.

[25:56] I'm going to end with the question we ask all of our guests on this podcast. We talk

mostly on this podcast about digital educational technology. What's one of your favorite analog educational technologies?

LaTonya: [26:13] I really believe very strongly in using books, particularly books that are about human experience for students.

[26:23] Even from a scholarly perspective, I really foreground books that in some way, shape or form deal directly with human experience as a way of getting students to think about worlds that they, themselves, have an experience.

[26:39] Or even to think about worlds that they have experienced, but to see it from a different perspective. That transformative power of reading is something that's probably my favorite. And then writing, so getting students to go through the process of producing their own texts to allow their readers to see something from a different perspective.

[27:10] I often tell students that there's something... Writing is like magic. You create a world for people through using scribbling on a screen or pieces of paper. It's really quite extraordinary if you think about it.

Derek: [27:29] Well, I've enjoyed this conversation thinking about what you described as this kind of somewhat artificial, two-way relationship between the student and the instructor, but then broadening that to a whole class and fostering multi-point conversations, and then maybe bringing in people who aren't physically there in the classroom.

[27:51] The folks who are reading and connecting with bigger communities and all of it about making those connections and helping other people see what's in your head and see what's in their head. Thanks. This has been fun.

LaTonya: [28:04] You're welcome. It's a pleasure.

[28:04] [music]

Derek: [28:08] That was LaTonya Trotter, assistant professor of sociology here at Vanderbilt University.

[28:12] I appreciated how LaTonya has a clear objective, helping students with long-form

reading and selects technologies and teaching practices that support that objective and I really liked her use of course blogs as a way to prepare students for deeper interactions during class.

[28:24] We talked with the number of faculty here at Vanderbilt and elsewhere that have found Course Blogs are useful tool for learning and engagement. I use them regularly in my first-year writing seminar.

[28:32] In this episode, I'll put a link to my Center for Teaching guide on blogs, which features practical examples of instructors teaching with blogs and a few video interviews with faculty here at Vanderbilt who have used blogs successfully.

[28:46] You can find those show notes on our website, leadinglinespod.com. We welcome your comments and questions there and on Twitter where our handle is @leadinglinespod.

[28:54] You can subscribe to our podcast through iTunes or your other favorite podcast app. If you like what you hear in the podcast, please leave us a rating and review on iTunes. That helps other listeners find the show.

[29:04] Leading Lines is produced by the Center for Teaching, The Vanderbilt Institute for Digital Learning, The Office of Scholarly Communication to the Vanderbilt Library, and the Associate Provost for Digital Learning.

[29:12] This episode was edited Rhett McDaniel. Look for new episodes the first and third Monday of each month. I'm your host, Derek Bruff. Thanks for listening.