Teaching Philosophy 2026

Samuel Avery

At the core of my teaching philosophy is a belief that learning happens most powerfully when students are trusted with meaningful responsibility. In film and media education, this means moving beyond passive consumption of information and into environments where students are actively making, questioning, revising, and reflecting. My role as an educator is not simply to deliver content, but to design spaces where students can test ideas, take creative risks, and see the real-world consequences of their work.

Since beginning my teaching career, my pedagogy has been grounded in experiential, production-based learning. I teach students not only how media is analyzed or written about, but how it is made, circulated, and received. This approach requires structure, clarity, and accountability, but it also requires flexibility and trust. I strive to create classrooms that function as creative-collective spaces where students from different majors, backgrounds, and levels of experience can contribute meaningfully to shared projects. In these environments, learning emerges through collaboration, problem-solving, and reflection embedded directly in the act of making.

One of the defining features of my teaching is the integration of learning beyond the traditional classroom. In 2018, I founded the ProLab, a voluntary, co-curricular production initiative that allows students to engage in professional-style filmmaking outside of required coursework. ProLab is not an assignment or a class; it is an opportunity for students who want to go further to collaborate with me on writing, producing, and exhibiting original films. These projects are publicly screened at regional film festivals, giving students firsthand experience with peer review, audience reception, and creative accountability. The ProLab has become a sustained pedagogical extension of my teaching, one that reinforces the idea that learning does not stop when a class ends and that creative work gains meaning when it enters the public sphere.

Similarly, my role as founder and Executive/Artistic Director of the [Blackbird Film Festival](#) has deeply shaped my teaching philosophy. Blackbird is not only a festival; it is a learning environment. Students serve as programmers, staff members, and ambassadors, gaining insight into how creative communities are built and sustained. Through Blackbird, students see how storytelling functions within cultural, ethical, and social contexts. The festival allows me to model professional leadership while also demonstrating that creative work is inseparable from community engagement and responsibility.

The COVID-19 pandemic forced a significant rethinking of my teaching practice. Like many faculty, I was required to shift away from in-person, hands-on instruction and redesign my courses for virtual delivery. Rather than treating this transition as temporary, I approached it as an opportunity to rethink how students engage with course material. During this period, I developed www.profavery.online, a comprehensive teaching portal that supports asynchronous, modular, and scaffolded learning. The site allows students to engage with lessons, assignments, and resources at their own pace while maintaining clear expectations and consistent structure. The strategies developed during this period now support both my online and in-person courses, increasing accessibility and allowing students to revisit material as needed.

Assessment and reflection are central to my teaching practice, but I am increasingly intentional about how and when evaluation occurs. In the post-COVID era, traditional end-of-semester course evaluations have become less reliable due to dramatically reduced participation. As a result, I have shifted toward ongoing

formative feedback throughout the semester, such as conversations, check-ins, critiques, and reflective discussions that allow me to respond to student needs in real time. I have found this approach to be far more effective for supporting learning and adjusting instruction than relying solely on anonymous feedback collected after a course has concluded.

Ultimately, my teaching philosophy has evolved from focusing on individual courses to building sustainable learning systems. Whether it's through the classroom, the ProLab, my online course portal, or the Blackbird Film Festival, my goal is to create environments where students feel empowered to take ownership of their learning, understand the broader impact of their creative work, and develop the confidence to contribute meaningfully beyond the university.

Teaching, for me, is not a static practice, it's an ongoing process of reflection, adaptation, and commitment to students as emerging creators and critical thinkers.

Sincerely,
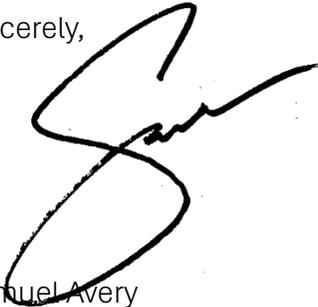
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An afterthought:

As I reflect on the distance between my previous teaching philosophy, written in 2019 (included below), and the one presented above, it is striking how profoundly the world, and my understanding of it, has changed. That earlier document was written before a global pandemic, before years of sustained uncertainty, and before the immense personal and professional demands of preserving creative spaces like the Blackbird Film Festival during a period when so much was being lost. Returning to that earlier mindset is difficult not because I was wrong or misguided, but because those ideas simply belong to a different moment in time, one shaped by assumptions of stability, access, and connection that no longer hold true in the same way.

This revised philosophy reflects what has been learned since then: about resilience, adaptability, and the necessity of meeting students where they are in a world that continues to change rapidly. I have learned to hold structured learning with much softer hands these days and to remind myself that everyone has something going on in their life that may not be conducive to the teaching approach I have chosen. To that end, I am also mindful that, just as 2019 now feels distant, this document will one day read as a reflection of its own moment in time.

Teaching, like storytelling, is never finished, it is continually reshaped by experience, context, and the evolving needs of students. My commitment is not to a fixed set of methods, but to remaining reflective, responsive, and engaged in whatever the world looks like when I next revisit these ideas...

Teaching Philosophy 2019

Samuel Avery

"He does not teach his pupils his knowledge, but orders them to venture into the forest of things and signs, to say what they have seen and what they think of what they have seen, to verify it and have it verified."

-Jacques Rancière, The Emancipated Spectator

As only a year has passed since I drafted my last teaching philosophy, I find that I am still struggling with the same challenges I outlined in 2018 regarding teaching Digital Film and Media Production. With that said, I have been developing a "Beyond Classroom Learning" approach over this past year to try and rectify these issues. Summarized below are my updates and thoughts:

Challenge #1 – Technology is an ever-changing "blob" that must be kept current…

> Unfortunately, there's not much that can be done to completely solve this issue. At the end of the day, instructors of New Media must simply stay as current as possible while being realistic when teaching students about these shifting trends in production. With that said, I have attempted to include students more in my own discovery process. Since technology tends to change so quickly, it is best for students to experience these new modes first hand. For instance, one of the best ways to stay ahead of current trends in film production (I find) is to attend film festivals that are attempting to include new modes of storytelling, such as Virtual Reality, and "push" the envelope so to speak. For example, during the Fall 2018 semester, I organized a weekend trip to the Adirondack Film Festival in Glens Falls, NY for 11 students interested in media production and/or event planning. As luck would have it, the Great Western Catskills International Film Festival (GWCIFF) was also happening that same weekend in Andes, NY and so students were able to experience two diverse festivals for the price of one! This trip was an extremely successful exercise in "Beyond Classroom Learning" in that both the students and I were able to experience a variety of new trends together and discuss them in the moment. For the students, the experience was "first-hand" and therefore had a much stronger / lasting impact on them rather than me (the instructor) regurgitating what I had experienced without them… With this in mind, I also organized a studio visit to News Channel 9 in Syracuse, NY for my COM 342 – Video Production II (studio) class to witness the behind-the-scenes production of the 4pm news broadcast. Students were able to meet local news anchors and ask questions about the industry while standing in the very space they may start their career one day. Again, this type of "Beyond Classroom Learning" has very immediate and lasting effects. Almost as soon as we returned to work in the studio the next week, I noticed many of the students imitating / practicing techniques and phrases they had heard during our class visit. In addition, they all seemed to approach class-time in a much more professional manor immediately following our trip. The same can be said of the media production students who attended the festival weekend trip. Upon returning, I noticed these students were approaching their next film project with much higher expectations. I also noticed them discussing the various festivals they intended to submit their completed work to. This was absolutely fantastic to see as students need to view their work as more than just a "class project".

Challenge #2 – Students questioning the "need" for a film school education…

> As I outlined in my 2018 teaching philosophy, most of my students have grown up with very advanced technology and tend to question the purpose of a more tradition film school education… Especially at a time when many smartphones have the ability to "make a movie" with the press of a button. In addition, several of my production focused students over the past few semesters have told me that they believe college to be a waste of time <u>BECAUSE</u> they want to start their own production company and/or become independent filmmakers and they feel class is delaying their professional life... Obviously, as an instructor of media production, this is very troubling as I certainly don't want students to feel they are wasting their time and money. And so the challenge becomes: How do I make class time feel worthwhile for these students? What educational experience can I provide to them that is unique to a classroom environment?

> One the one-hand, I can understand where students are coming from with these concerns. At the end of the day, the University of YouTube is always open, and many very successful filmmakers are indeed self-taught. A motivated person with a resourceful disposition is absolutely able to figure this "tech" stuff out on their own. So, what can be done?

> Firstly, I realized that students were telling me exactly what they wanted – I just had to listen. They wanted to be productive and they felt that college / class was not a productive use of their time. So again, using this idea of "Beyond Classroom Learning", I adjusted my production syllabi and turned our "class-time" into "production-time". For instance, instead of spending a day lecturing about the basics of screenwriting, we would collaboratively work as a production unit to develop an idea and then write that script together as I provided guidance along the way. By making class-time feel more like an actual film set, students became

much more committed to the task at hand. I first attempted this during the Spring 2018 semester with my COM 243 – Video Production I (field) class when we produced the short film, *The Study Date* (2018). In previous semesters, I would spend class-time training students to use the cameras, microphones, and lights and then allow them some time to practice what was covered in small groups… Following the practice, I would typically assign them a project to complete on their own with an arbitrary deadline a week or so later... Good, not great. However, with this "Beyond Classroom Learning" approach, I decided to skip all the training/practice prep and, instead, place students immediately into a larger production with pre-established markers for broader success (such as festival recognition). By essentially assigning students to real-world production positions, they were forced to learn "on the job" and maintain a level of professionalism I had not seen during their "in-class" practice sessions – time that, I believe, students felt was ultimately wasteful in that there was really no "end point" to the practice exercise. In contrast, establishing a "life" for our film projects (festival submissions, screenings, IMDB credits, etc.) gave students the motivation they desired!

Following the success of *The Study Date* (2018) project in Spring 2018, I decided to design my COM 446 – Advanced Filmmaking class entirely around this "Beyond Classroom Learning" approach and did away with practice-shoots altogether. Firstly, I split the semester up into three short films (Sept = Film #1, Oct. = Film #2, Nov. = Film #3) with varying success markers and the class began pre-planning as a production unit during the first week of class! The students of COM 446 and I would go on to produce two short films, *The Mayor* (2019) and *Special Skills* (2019), both of which are now on the 2019 festival circuit and will most certainly receive recognition from a variety of regional festivals. By acting as a production team to produce short films meant for a larger audience, students not only learned the technical process but also felt a sense of accomplishment in that their name is now officially connected to an actual production and not just a "school project." As evidence, you will find their official credits listed on IMDB for both *The Mayor* and *Special Skills*: IMDB Page for *The Mayor* & IMDB Page for *Special Skills*

While the "Beyond Classroom Learning" approach certainly required a great deal of additional prep for me in that we were always in the field doing production, I was incredibly pleased to read the student CTE comments for COM 446 (Fall 2018):

> One student writes:
> "[Advanced Filmmaking] is an excellent class and gives students the ability to practice real world skills, build our portfolios and expand on our production experience at the advance level."

> Another student writes:
> "The course taught me a lot and was great experience for working in film. Being able to work in pre-production, post-production, and production was great hands on teaching that was more beneficial than any other film course."

> And lastly:
> "…as a senior [COM 446] gave me a lot of content to show. This has really been key in my eyes. I think overall the variety is great and allows for different aspects of a film career. I think this is an important class."

After just two semesters attempting using this "Beyond Classroom Learning" approach, I know there is room for a lot of improvement BUT I am very happy to see, what seems to be, a shift in the "college is a waste of time" attitude when I read feedback that describes classes like COM 446 – Advanced Filmmaking as "beneficial", "real world", and "important."

As I look to the future, I have already started preparing a variety of new "Beyond Classroom Learning" experiences for students including more film festival trips, more studio observations, as well as visits to larger production hubs such as NYC and Toronto.

Sincerely,
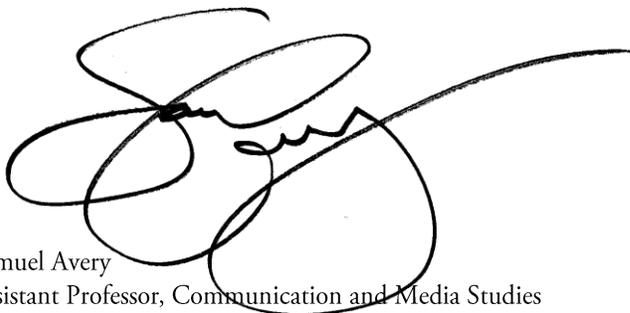
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