Dear Professor Belli,

When I first began the semester, I was excited at all the possibilities that I would entail in the course Writing with New Media. After returning from a summer filled with challenging experiences and unique characters, I was thrilled to share all the new skills that I learned over the summer. When I first read the course description to refresh my mind, I assumed I would be writing within various new forms of media platforms. After the first class, I realized that I was already well versed in Wordpress and OpenLab due to past courses within the major and my internship at the Communications office at the college, which provided me with advantage. Nonetheless, I was overjoyed to learn another side of these mediums that I was familiar with. The semester carried on and during the middle of November you introduced the Final Project.

At first, the project seemed quite interesting. I was excited at the chance of creating an individualized project from scratch, which would showcase all of the skills I learned over the semester. When the project was first introduced, all the different aspects of the project surprisingly overwhelmed me. The final project for Writing with New Media seemed like this big cloud of confusion and I could not fully comprehend what was being asked of me. I had no idea where to start; I had no inclining of what I wanted to do and how to execute the project. I began to explore ideas that were centered on storytelling, visual rhetoric, and culture within photojournalism. I probably spent the longest time out of all of my classmates on narrowing down the project because I did not understand the project.

 My initial project proposal was grounded on around the subjects of visual rhetoric, new technologies, storytelling, culture and photojournalism and the photo blog Humans of New York. Initially, I wanted to examine how culture affects the way individuals interpret a story. Specifically, I wanted to probe the question “Has our cultural beliefs affected the way we interpret an image and why does it affect the way the interpret a image? I believe that many of these images have shaped the way we see the world and various media misrepresent certain cultures. My belief was that environmental factors, psychology, traumatic events, fear, and age are major factors that play a role in how our psyche interprets an image.  Although this seemed like a phenomenal topic to explore, it was not something I could research with the time given. The project I was imaging would require world-class psychologists and a massive research center funded by grants. It is a topic I hope that I’m able to explore later on in my academic career.

I began revising the project proposal and slowly but surely, I realized that I wanted my project to center on was “Mastering Storytelling in Photojournalism”. I chose to focus on this topic because new media technologies have changed the ways in which stories are shared. There are many affordance with this platform because it gives people all around the world a platform to share their stories. However at the same time it may limit other individuals from sharing their stories.

Once I discovered my project, all the ideas began to blossom into something novel and unique and I ran with it. The next step of the project was to find sources that supported my idea that I was still nurturing. At first, I found the annotated bibliography, tedious, I thought why in the world do I need to do this? In the long run the annotated bibliography gave me a chance to dig deeper into research that would support my ideas. The annotated bibliography helped me to clearly define my proposal. This led me to hone in on my project. I wanted to explore the photo blog Humans of New York (HONY) stories via Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and their blog. My aim was to create almost of their top 10 best practices and then try and create stories using these best practices. This all became apparent later on in the process. This was quite a meaningful revelation because I found the idea that I wanted to explore which would help me in understanding how individuals shared their stories on loss via HONY. The project is very dear to my heart because I enjoy reading stories on loss and I wanted to see if my rendition of HONY could be just as successful. The process of learning how to share a story via these social sites would help me when I write my memoir later on in my career.

After weeks of research and producing deliverables that received less feedback/user engagement than I was expecting, it forced me to start reevaluating the parameters of the project? There came a point where I thought “What if the numbers don't matter?” This turning point in the project afforded me a chance to look at the story which cannot be quantified. So much of my project was spent on the analytics of each image and the user engagement that I forgot about the story. The most important part of the project was the story. The stories which was shared by participant had a platform to live on and gave them a voice. Their stories mattered more than any likes or comments, it was the story which influenced the start of my project. It was not until after several iterations that I discovered this.

As I look back at the past two months, there were various elements of this project that was challenging to me. Actually, if I'm being honest I found the entire project challenging.  The first was the initial stage of creating the proposal. I had no idea of what to propose to create a project that would be interesting and would have deliverables that would include multimodal composing elements. I struggled immensely with choosing a research project because I have never done anything like this before. In the first stages when I did not have a clear proposal, it made the research phase very difficult.  Nonetheless, I tried researching ideas that included storytelling. It took almost an entire month to have a clear idea of what I wanted to do. I feel that as I go along the project begins to manifest in a weird way--- I found it to be beautiful! It was the coming of something spectacular.

While completing the project “At what point in your life do you acknowledge defeat?” was a question that came to my mind. There were moments I wondered, “Have I successfully articulated in my proposal what my project is and how I expect to complete this project. It’s very much of challenge to clearly define my purpose of this project as well as the deliverables. I went back and forth with trying to clearly state my vision of this project. The project required a lot of discipline that I did not have because I was focused in various places. As a result, it forced me to rethink my management skills and how I prepare for a project. In a weird way this project has helped me develop as a critical thinker. Specifically, how I analyzed and synthesized a project brief. Looking back, there were many times I did not use my time effectively during the first rounds of this project which made the project more difficult to complete. With the built up frustration, confusion, and exhaustion, the project gave me a chance to reflect on who I have been all my life. It has required that I change many of my bad habits. This project required me to clearly define a proposal with specific guidelines. Another significant moment of the project that I did not first take into consideration was how much a collaborative project it would be. I had to not only take into the consideration the feedback from my professor but also the feedback of my classmates. I was never exposed to anything like that before. It was very challenging the different suggestions--- it was a lot of heads in the pot. In many ways more than one my classmates helped me to shape my project because of the feedback that I received. There were also forced elements of the project which was designed to keep me on track. One of these elements was the requiring of giving in class lightening presentations that would help me to be clear and specific. Later, I discovered that this is a crucial part of writing with new media technologies.

My favorite moment of the project was creating my deliverables. I got a chance to interview individuals on a subject that was dear to my heart, loss. I chose loss because it was important to me to know about the different types of loss people experience through their lives and how they share it via new media communities. I interviewed a friend of mine and my friends’ friend and lastly myself. I did not identify these individuals because in the blog Humans of New York they remain anonymous and I wanted to respect their wishes as well. I posted the images on my personal social sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and my personal blog Black Attire Aficionado. The project in my eyes was a success and a failure because I realized in the long run that it is not about success or numbers or users. Many of us have become so wrapped in the idea of analytics that we can’t look at the bigger picture. In my eyes, the bigger picture is the individuals who subject themselves to scrutiny in an effort to have a voice. Through this project I was able to learn about user engagement and had an even more in depth look at social sites. And by the end of the experiment I realized it was almost as if I was putting price or a number to someone’s life, it was not fair.

Finally, I believe the project made me realize more than ever that not only do I want to be an ethical composer in writing with new media technologies but to share stories that would never receive a platform to be shared on. I am even more inspired than ever to apply for an internship to TED Talk. I thank you Professor Belli, for your words of encouragement and endless feedback. I hope you enjoy the final project because I sure did.

Sincerely,

Jodieann J. Stephenson