Valerie Francisco Podcast Transcript

Sam: Welcome to the UP TechTalk Podcast, coming to you from the Academic Multimedia Studio on the University of Portland campus. Produced by Academic Technology Services with your hosts, Maria Erb and Sam Williams.

Welcome to the UP TechTalk Podcast. Today we have with us Dr. Valerie Francisco-Menchavez, Assistant Professor in Sociology and Social Work here at the University of Portland. Thank you for joining us!

Valerie: You’re welcome, happy to be here, thanks for having me.

Maria: Thanks for coming over Valerie. And we, we’re so excited to have you on the podcast because you did this incredible project last year with your students, a video project in your social inequality, social justice class. Can you tell us about that project and why you wanted to use video in it?

Valerie: Sure. Actually the class was race and ethnicity, and I think, the digital storytelling format and sort of video production, I wanted to tap into two things. I wanted to see how students who were talk-storying, which is sort of an indigenous scholarly methodology from Hawaii, thinking about how people sort of talk about their lives in a story way already. So, I want to tap into that skill that we already have, just sort of that skill that how we experience race in and on campus, race and ethnic relations in the city of Portland. And so I thought that the digital story telling project could help students sort of have a sociological method around collecting stories, but it could also have this powerful sort of format in which they could tell, not just our class but a wider audience, right? The UP campus, sort of, you know, their communities here in Portland. And I think that the digital storytelling project really would allow me to do both of those things.

Sam: And really, I love digital storytelling, and so I was so excited when I heard that you were wanting to do that as a project, and so, it made me very happy, and coming from an indigenous background as well.

Valeria: Right.

Sam: And so did, with your project, and I know you’ll tell us a little bit more about it, but, was it just, like how did you have them start the project though? I mean, because I think people want to dive into the media immediately…

Valerie: Yes.

Sam: and, I’m going to find a song and stuff, and we definitely, they need to find music and stuff like that, so how did you get them started?

Valerie: Ok, so, what was one thing, helpful for me was the digital story telling workshop that was facilitated by the department, you’re department, the Academic Technology Services department. Where I really thought about process oriented instead of product-oriented sort of pedagogy around the digital story telling project. So what that meant is that, I sort of broke up the project into the semester. And the first way that I had them do that was, or I had them jump into the project after of course reading sociological material on race and ethnicity, was really to brainstorm, what question do you want to explore, and what are some of the things that you already know? So, for example, one set of students wanted to talk about whiteness on campus, right and wanted to explore that. But what about whiteness? What about whiteness interested you, right? And, they started to narrow their projects. And so even before they thought about what kind of cuts or angles in the video do you want, I sort of got them thinking about how they would, or you know, the content first. And I think that’s really helpful before you just sort of gorilla video, you know? Like, you know approach everyone, what’s whiteness to you? Or whatever you know, that they have a sort of road map for themselves. And Maria, you were super helpful in sort of helping me think through that.

Maria: Thanks.

Valerie: Yeah.

Maria: Well I’m glad you mentioned that workshop with Andy Blubaugh, that really was a good workshop. And you know, and we got so much great outcome from that because you did this incredible project and so did Alice, and that was great, I’m so glad you both got a lot out of that.

Valerie: Yeah.

Maria: So how did your students react to this assignment? Brand new for them.

Valerie: Yeah, absolutely, and I think, one student sort of won their challenge with an assignment, their first reaction is like a groan, like ugh, oh my God, I can’t. And actually, what we came to find out is there’s so many students in the classroom that had you know, edited a family video on iVideo, or Final Cut Pro, right? So, there was at least one or two people in every group, like 6 groups that had already sort of touched their Apple in that you know program. And so I think, when we start to mine students knowledge, the knowledge they already bring to the classroom, then it starts to become less daunting, right? Now, that’s when the roles sort of kick in. So the iVideo person was going to obviously do a lot of the post production. Other students who were not so knowledgeable in that stepped up into the role of I’m going to go collect the data, right? I’m going to go to the library and actually get the camera, and I’m going to shoot. Some people were like, I don’t really want to do that, I’m going to try to figure out how we’re going to organize the digital storytelling video, right? So, when  folks got clarified in terms of what their roles were in the project, which also you know was facilitated in class, so then we just had to figure out themselves. Then I think they sort of got comfortable with the role and the project.

Maria: That’s also good to here. I do think that that really makes it easier to roll out projects like this moving forward. You know that that’s going to be an important piece, getting those roles assigned early on is going to be helpful.

Valerie: Yeah, absolutely.

Sam: And, we, definitely a new project that’s around media, you know it’s not just writing a paper. I think we, everybody gets so used to the normal, it’s I think shaking it up a little bit’s fun, and so, so you have the group starting, you have they’re finding their topics, they’re researching all that stuff. Did you find that their enthusiasm built as they started going through the project? Like, I’m hoping that it built through the project.

Valerie: Yeah, I mean I think what’s important to note is the project, it was a semester long. It wasn’t the last 4 weeks of the course, it started right from the beginning, right? And, in the first weeks of the semester, even if they only read 2 or 3 chapters of the book, we already started to think about it so I think, it’s also setting it up in the course, in the syllabus, where, you know, I didn’t call the final exam a final exam period, we called it like the final show, right?

Maria: Right.

Valerie: So you know students feel excited about ok, so we’re going to have an all nighter right before our show, but it’s our show, it’s the time where we’re going to be able to share our work. And so, I think, also when people were able to get help on the video production, people started to feel like, oh, I’m going to, I’m really proud of what I’m going to do, and you know I’m trying to show off, pop my collar a little bit, you know, with our video projects. So I think, it did build up, but it has to start from a tiny sort of drum beat you know in the beginning, and sort of work itself into the crescendo in the end, you know?

Sam: I really like that, that’s really nice. And did they get help through the library?

Maria: Yeah, I know.

Valerie: Yes.

Sam: With Jose? Or…?

Valerie: With Jose we went in a couple of sessions sort of just to familiarize ourselves with iVideo and Final Cut Pro. And then we went in separately. So I would have work sessions, and then you know, sort of, they would do their own thing in the digital lab.

Maria: And the results, the final outcomes were really impressive. Did your students feel that way too?

Valerie: Yeah. I think many of them felt really proud. I think, the product itself was great for them. I mean, some of them, they felt like man I could have done it better if I had more time, right, and I think that’s all of our, like my dissertation could have been better. Everything can be done better with more time…

Maria: Yeah, right.

Valerie: but we’re frequently proud about it. But I think what was most proud about was what they learned, right? I mean, I think, there was one video that was really moving around immigrants and their immigrant experiences, or immigrant experiences here at UP, and they were able to connect to Asian-American, Latino-American, first generation students and sort of talk with people about like, your parents expectations and then what you actually can do at, in college, right? And I think that kind of ethnicity, or ethnicizing the college experience was so fruitful for them, and for them to be able to tell a cohesive story, across for them I think was really awesome. And for me as a sociologist that’s super important, right? That they were able to stitch together, to braid together these stories, and have one arch to them. And I think that’s what’s cool about the digital storytelling process, it’s that arch, right? You have to really find one message and one argument, kind of like a paper almost, but in this other format, right? It has an introduction, it has a thesis, it has a question, it has sort of data, right? And, the students get to have conclusions about that. And so I think when they’re collaborating I feel like they feel proud of that.

Maria: Yeah and I feel like for me, the most incredible thing was that they have such staying power in these stories, you know the final outcome, like I watched your projects a number of times. I watched each one of them, and they stay with me, I remember them, I think about them. And I can’t say that for any other, you know paper that I’ve heard about in class or somebody giving an in class presentation, it doesn’t have that staying power or that resonance.

Valerie: That’s right.

Maria: But these digital stories do.

Sam: Well it’s very difficult to, you know, you have to be a really good writer to create mood

Maria: Yes.

Valerie:  Yes.

Sam: and to be able to do more than just put words, you know, on a piece of paper. You know, that’s what I love about digital storytelling anyway it’s that you’re able to really put, even if it’s just still photography, you know, and with music or whatever, and just bring that image and helping people fill in the gaps. Because if you’re reading, you’re creating that in your own head, and you have your background that you’re coming from, so what are you really creating, and is it accurate to the story? And so,

Valerie: Right, and I think that harkens back the talk story, right? Like Hawaiian scholars talk about how oral history has been passed down in terms of talk story, and that, there’s a lot that you can miss in the written word. Where, when you’re talking with someone and there’s an inflection in their voice, and you see their face, there is something there that you can catch more than what they’re just saying right, more than your story when it’s embodying in that way, and I think that the digital story telling project, when it captures, you know, visuality, space, interaction, it tells you much, much more than what the research question is, whether it’s what’s the immigrant experience or what does whiteness feel like on the UP campus, there’s so much more that you can offer, you know.

Maria: Yeah, I think that’s a huge point, I mean I feel like that format really liberates the information, and we just were talking about academic writing and how we feel that stifles and really confines the information a lot of times and makes it inaccessible. But I feel like you’re project, especially about whiteness, one, I see that in my head right now, I feel it, and I’ve thought about it so many times, it really makes an impact.

Valerie: Yeah, and I think, you know, the digital story telling project as an assignment, for a class like a race and ethnicity, or social inequalities, or something that sort of, a course that you know, explores social issues, is so important because of the ability for you to capture all of that, and for it to stay with you right? And I think you’re exactly right. That kind of format lends itself to how students tell a story a particular way.

Maria: Yeah.

Sam: And we definitely do not want to have knock too much of academic writing, because that’ll be the first time we get a bunch of negative email.

Maria: Hate mail coming.

Sam: We’ll get our first hate mail in from people.

Valerie: I mean I think academic writing is awesome, I’m an academic, but I think there’s also ways to remix it, right?

Sam: Exactly.

Maria: Yeah.

Valerie: I think students already have those skills,

Maria: Exactly.

Valerie: they’re always making memes, or vines, or all of these things. So I think we meet them halfway in the middle and ask them to take their academic knowledge and remix it in a way, into formats that they’re so familiar with already, I think we’ve got something really interesting.

Maria: How about just making knowledge accessible?

Valerie: Sure, yeah.

Maria: You know that’s kind of my mantra, and I feel like we should be in that business, you know.

Valerie: Yes.

Sam: And really, it reinforces and it reinforces the topic, and if you’re getting it from in different  forms, like if you’re just writing and you’re reading, you know I don’t feel like I’m really absorbed in that topic, but if I’m listening to people, if I’m watching something, if I really am starting to absorb some that content. We talked to somebody about, it does take, in a lot of ways it does take more work to build media projects,

Valerie: Yeah, absolutely, absolutely.

Sam: and so I, I think somebody mentioned in a previous podcast that, and I think it might have been Dr. Gates, I can’t remember right of the top of my head, but, that the students actually were able, she, this person felt, because I know that I’m going to get it wrong, felt that the students really understood the topic more.

Valerie: Yes.

Maria: Yeah, that was Dr. Gates’ podcast.

Valerie: Yeah I mean, if you think about how long you spend in post production like rewinding 4 seconds, you know, like I know that you both know what that’s like. You really have to think about, ok what concept am I trying to get through here? Is that, is this 15 second sound byte really going to support my analysis? Right?

Maria: Right.

Valerie: I’m also not proposing that we sort of switch and everyone should do digital story telling instead of having papers. I see the point of that

Sam: Yeah.

Valerie: and in my class there were also, you know your sort of traditional academic writing, I just, I don’t want my fellow colleagues to be like, what’s happening in your class?

Sam: Right.

Valerie: You’re just making videos? In tandem with sort of the traditional academic learning styles and learning assignments, I think that it’s an added bonus for them to be able to talk about what we’ve studied in their own way, right? And that’s sort of what our role is as educators, we want our students to sort of internalize what we’ve taught, and sort of, you know, push it out in a way that they understand, and I think that the video projects did exactly that.

Maria: Yeah. And I’m really curious now to hear about your info graphics project that you rolled out last semester. That too was another innovative use of new media. So how did that one role out? And what were you thinking when you chose that?

Valerie: I was thinking, for my global sociology class, I was thinking that, the video project wouldn’t be as, wouldn’t be the type of instructional technology that would meet the objectives I wanted, because I thought that, when we’re talking about global issues, I feel like folks think that globalization is somewhere sort of in the sky, and not close to us, that happens to us every day. And, I wanted a sort of a visual map for students to be able to share with their brother, share with their parents, share with their friends, like, this is the, how like export processing zones, or manufacturing, like sweatshops work. And here’s a sock first, it was a piece of thread first, and then you know, sort of, have that kind of map for them to share. And so I thought that the info graphics method would be a good one because, most students can sort of do it, right? I think that’s one of the objectives was to be able to gain some skills from the assignment, but also to start to explain what we were discussing in class through a visual sort of format. The info graphic things, I mean sometimes it worked, and sometimes it didn’t work. But, I think what was helpful is, there’s so many things out there now, that can allow you to design a flyer, I mean do you remember when it was like, here design a flyer, and everyone was like, well I don’t know how to use Photoshop. And that was like the only way to make a flyer right?

Sam: Well and then everybody got into Publisher and Word and then you had every piece of awful clipart that you could possibly have in a poster.

Maria: Yeah, exactly.

Valerie: Yeah, exactly. And you know, FYI all that clipart is now no longer available, did you hear about that?

Maria: Oh, thank goodness.

Sam: It’s actually a good thing.

Valerie: Yeah right, so. I mean but now you have all this sort of, Internet based apps, Right? Or applications

Sam: Yes.

Valerie: or programs to do it, and they have you know themes, and sort of, what do you call, templates, right? And so I thought that that might be a little more helpful for students to not have to get training in Photoshop, which people spend their whole, you know college degrees on

Maria: Yeah, careers.

Valerie: Yeah careers on. But they could plug and play still, right?

Sam: So, with the video you were able to narrow it down to a couple tools, and then kind of, and then focus on content. Did you find, were you able to focus in on a couple of tools? Or did you kind of just let students kind of figure the technology part out on their own?

Valerie: Yeah I think, because it was my first try, the first installment of each one, the teach one assignment was, I actually allowed them to do whatever they wanted, right? So, it could have been a blog post, it could have been a photo essay, an info graphic, etc. And I think, I think students get a little rattled by like, here’s the world, do what you want to do. I think they work better with a little bit of structure, and so I think the info graphic, and sort of narrowing it down to some tools that are accessible to them really helped students out. So, one thing that I asked Jose Velazco to come in and do another training on is Google Paint, which is a, is on the gmail client, right? But, I also had a student come up and sort of do a quick training on info graph, right? And picto chart, and that already sort of sounded like a teach one and teach one pedagogy, right? Where students were like, I already know how to do this, let me just show you, it’s really simple. And so narrowing it down to some form, platforms really helped them out.

Maria: Yeah, and again, the results are super impressive,

Valerie: Yes.

Maria: I love those info graphics. I mean they look just like,

Valerie: Yeah, right.

Maria: just high quality, like wow this is visually interesting and the information is going to be fantastic.

Valerie: Yeah, and I mean, that’s the part that I thought really worked in this project. They had to choose, right? Because info graphics can’t be too muddled, right? And when they’re too muddle it just doesn’t work, if there’s too much text, or too many facts or too many numbers, it actually doesn’t work. So you really have to narrow down what are the, what are the most convincing pieces of data to convince people that sweatshop labor, not a good look, not really good for anyone, right? Or, the oil spills in Niger, not really a good thing, right? Or, you know those kinds of things, they really had to to reasearch, do a lot of research, and then sort of choose the best pieces of data to present on that info graphic.

Maria: I love it.

Sam: Well and it’s narrowing it down to a single image, or a single icon that represents such an important, you know important piece of information.

Valerie: Right.

Maria: Yeah.

Sam: And, and I don’t, I’m glad you said about not having too much on the screen, and you know, or on the content, you know. I’m a big fan of whitespace.

Valerie: Oh, me too.

Sam: So, I think people can really just cram so much in there that they can loose every bit of impact

Valerie: Yes.

Sam: that it could ever have had. So, it kind of reminds me of the poster projects that people have done. So it’s really taking that poster project to that next level.

Valerie: Right, right.

Sam: So some we’ve seen, some interesting poster projects where it’s that one giant graph, and then a bunch of text,

Valerie: Yes, yes.

Sam: and you just look at them and you’re, you’re like what are you trying to say?

Maria: Yeah I think that one on Toms shoes, just was incredible.

Valerie: Excellent.

Maria:  I loved that one.

Valerie: And I think the choosing how to present your data is also an academic exercise, right? Many scholars are often always in writing articles or their books, they’re always trying to figure out how to package their argument. For my students I think it was their first, sort of, entrée to thinking about, information is actually produced by people, right? Many of my students

Sam: Right.

Valerie: Right? When you see an info graphic, where does it come from, right? And I think it was really a practice of like critical media consumption, right? They were like, oh, we get to choose the angle in which we’re going to talk about Toms, right? The Toms project, the info graphic by Joey Monaco, was basically , she was saying shoes, it actually hurts local economies in Africa you know when people donate those shoes, because the local shoe economies, in countries in Africa where they’re donated collapse, right? So that’s a very different story than what we hear when we see the Toms commercials with like, beautiful music, and you know, shoeless kids, and then now they have shoes, right?

Maria: Yeah, exactly.

Valerie: And I think Joey as a student was like, oh, ok, I get to make an argument about Toms, and therefore, she was like, I never thought about that before, that people are you know, making these messages and you know crafting these messages, and to me, that’s such a sociological practice, and such an important lesson to have as a human being in the world, to know that like, information is coming from somewhere, coming from a perspective. And for them to be making these info graphics, they were really able to say ok this is my argument, and this is my perspective and so I’m going to show it this way. Here are 4 pieces of data to show you about this Toms industry, right? And I think that that’s really powerful.

Maria: Really crafting a powerful argument, and making it in a memorable way. Again I’m never going to forget that Toms.

Valerie: Yeah, that’s right.

Maria: Yeah.

Sam: Well and as a part of this, so if you’re following us at sites.up.edu/techtalk, you can go there to, we’ll have the blog post there

Maria: Yes.

Sam: we’ll put some of the info graphics hopefully if we have permission.

Maria: And, and we’ll link to your videos from your previous project as well.

Valerie: Yeah, excellent.

Sam: Yeah. I just wanted to thank you so much for coming here today.

Valerie: Sure.

Sam: We could sit here and talk with you for,

Maria: Forever.

Sam: for a while. So, but you brought up so many amazing, so many amazing factors to your projects and stuff, and so we will get you back, and…

Maria: Right when yeah, definitely.

Sam: And thank you, and this entire time, just so, people don’t know but, you brought a baby into this world recently

Maria: A beautiful, beautiful baby.

Sam: And we have a baby in the studio that has been sleeping this entire time.

Maria: Oh my gosh

Valerie: The entire time. She’s been cooperating

Maria: So wonderful.

Valerie: She wanted to be on the podcast.

Sam: Yes she did, so thank you for coming.

Valerie: Thank you for having me.

Maria: Thank you both.

Valerie: Alright, thank you.

Sam: Thank you for joining us for another episode of the UP TechTalk podcast. Just a reminder that we post a new podcast every Friday morning, and you can find us at techtalk.up.edu.