

**Virginia Commonwealth University**  
**UNIV 217 SL ~ Fall 2013**  
***Finding Your Voice in Contemporary Society***

**Instructor: Dr. Vicki Pallo**  
**Email: [vpallo@vcu.edu](mailto:vpallo@vcu.edu)**  
**Office: 5137 Harris Hall**  
**Office Hours: MW 2-4pm; also by appointment**  
**Class times: T/R 12:30-1:45**

**SLTA: Christina Busam**  
**Email: [busamcr@vcu.edu](mailto:busamcr@vcu.edu)**

In this course, you will examine the strategies available in contemporary society for personal expression. We will explore what it means to have a “voice,” how to have a voice, and how to ensure that your expression is decoded and understood by your intended audience. Practical application will be explored through understanding cultural, textual and civic expression. We will examine trends in communicating ideas and values through a range of strategies such as music, fashion, advertising, consumer choice, visual media and technology. You will pursue projects based on your own interests in order to demonstrate and develop your influence on the world around you. In a sense, this is a course in the messages that are conveyed in our society, and how people decode and understand those messages.

**The core competencies addressed in this Tier II course are: *Information Fluency, Critical Thinking, and Ethical/Civic Responsibility*. The course curriculum will prepare students to:**

1. Assess the cogency of arguments, and construct her/his own argument
2. Think reflectively about modes of expression (their own and those of others)
3. Synthesize various source material in order to solve problems and find their own voice within a range of multidisciplinary perspectives
4. Engage in problem-based learning, requiring them to apply their critical thinking skills to determine the best solution or course of action in a given context, rather than adhering to a single standard approach.
5. Collect, evaluate and present information effectively and efficiently
6. Use information ethically and legally
7. Decode and construct cultural messages
8. Critically review actions in response to global/local issues
9. Apply learned strategies for addressing civic engagement through problem-based projects
10. Expand their ability to collaborate with others and appreciation for the benefits of group work (through a group project designed to integrate different forms of expression within a targeted campaign for change)

**The course is divided up into three units which address various avenues of personal expression. The units are:**

- **Civic Expression** (Volunteerism, Consumerism, Education, Political Activism, etc.)
- **Textual Expression** (Digital, Visual, and Rhetorical strategies)
- **Cultural Expression** (Music, Art, Fashion, Food, etc.)

While there is clearly overlap from one form of expression to the next, we will try to explore these various modes of expression separately in order to determine which responses work best for addressing particular issues/problems in our society. We will explore both practical and theoretical considerations of these strategies in order to facilitate this process.

**Course Materials:**

- Smoke, Trudy and Alan Robbins. *The World of the Image*. New York: Pearson Longman, 2007. [Required]
- Tomasino, Anna. *Discovering Popular Culture*. New York: Pearson Longman, 2007. [Required]
- Hacker, Diana. *A Writer's Reference* (use an edition published within the last 3 years). [Recommended]
- Additional readings will be provided via our course Blackboard site, so regular access to Blackboard is essential.
- VCU email account and regular access to a computer/internet.

**Final Grade Breakdown**

Unit Projects: (100 pts. each)	30%
Group Presentation/Essay:	30%
Other Coursework (Intro essay, journal, quizzes, other hw):	30%
Attendance and Active Participation:	10%
<b>Total: 1000pts</b>	<b>100%</b>

**Final Grading Scale:**

A = 90-100

B = 80-89.9

C = 70-79.9

D = 60-69.9

F = 59.9 and below

**Required Assignments:**

- **Individual Writing:** During each of the three course units, you will use a particular mode of expression relevant to that unit's goals to address an issue related to your chosen service project(s). A rationale for the choice of expression and projection of outcomes must accompany this work. Multiple drafts are recommended, and some in-class time may be afforded for peer critique of work. In addition to these more formal assignments, informal writing both in class and online will be used to promote thinking and communication of ideas.
- **Group Work:** Early in the semester service teams will be established, and these will become the primary means by which you will develop your projects for the course. As much as possible, teams should work on service projects together, and collaboration and feedback on unit projects is expected. By the end of the semester, you will need to implement at least one of the team's ideas from each unit and track the success/response of that project with your intended audience. At the end of the term your team will prepare for and produce a team paper that explains and analyzes your project, as well as a presentation to share your project (and the results) with the class. Updates/minutes for your projects should be posted on our course blog (see link on Bb menu). In addition to this more formal group work, you will be working collaboratively with your classmates on a variety of activities and discussions throughout the semester. (See group work handouts on Blackboard for more detail).
- **Quizzes:** Occasional quizzes will take place in class or online as a means of engaging with the readings as well as assessing student preparedness. These quizzes will always be based on the readings and class discussions.

**Service-Learning**

**What are the requirements for the Service-Learning component of this course?** Service-learning is a system of learning that asks for you to think critically by becoming active with the community. Because this course is designated as a Service-Learning course, you are required to participate in Service-Learning activities and to

meet all requirements associated with the Service-Learning work that you do. You'll be able to choose your community partner from the list we generate in class.

- You will commit twenty hours of service work during the semester with our community partners, chosen by our class from our list of partners. Depending on your service project, this may be a once-a-week meeting every week over the course of the semester, or it may be primarily covered in two or three days of work, requiring something approaching a day-long stretch of service. As much as possible, try to coordinate this service participation with your project team.
- You'll make an agreement for service to one of our chosen community partners.
- You'll keep a service log with your hours, to be signed by your community service contact.
- Throughout the semester, you'll write reflections about your project. We may have opportunities to present in class regarding your service experiences. We would love to see slides/photographs of your work, if applicable, so keep this in mind as you do your service-learning work. (i.e., bring a camera, but ask permission before taking photos!)
- You'll keep in touch with your group members concerning your service experience via your group site on Blackboard.
- At the end of the semester, you will turn in a short essay that reflects back on the service portion of this course and how it ties in with the course themes/expectations.

#### **What are the benefits of taking a Service-Learning course?**

- You will get a Service-Learning designation on your transcript (the course is designated "SL"), indicating that you have been willing to participate in service to your community.
- Your service learning course will be a line item for your resume. Future employers want to see that students have engaged in a variety of worthwhile activities during their academic careers. While good grades are of primary importance on a transcript, service learning can be that extra something that makes you stand out to a future employer.
- Contacts gained through your service relationship with community partners are likely to yield recommendation letters acknowledging your contribution to that organization. Here again, such a letter is excellent supplementary documentation in your resume files.
- You will move outside of VCU's boundaries, meeting new people and gaining knowledge about the community in which you live and study, becoming a participating member of the community.
- You will make a difference!

Service-Learning at VCU is a course-based, credit-bearing educational experience in which you participate in an organized service activity that meets community-identified needs. You will at intervals reflect on the service activity to increase understanding and application of course content and to enhance a sense of civic responsibility. A distinctive characteristic of service-learning is that it engages you in such reflection to enable you to synthesize your service experiences by connecting hands-on learning taking place in the community to academic concepts. Reflection encourages you to develop self-assessment skills as life-long learners, to appreciate diversity of life situations, and to explore and clarify values that can foster civic responsibility (Hatcher, Julie, and Robert Bringle. "Reflections: Bridging the gap between service and learning." *Journal of College Teaching* 45 (1997): 153-58.

#### **COURSE POLICIES**

**Cell Phone and Laptop Policy:** Cell phone and laptop use can create significant distractions in an active-learning class such as ours. On most class days, you will be engaged in doing and discussing things rather than taking notes or looking things up. Therefore, unless instructed otherwise, please leave your laptops in their cases. Turn off and put away your cell phones and other technological devices before entering the classroom. (I understand that there are occasional times when students need to be reached by cell phone-- for instance, if you have a job that requires you to be on-call or you are a parent with a sick child. If this is the case, please notify me as you

enter the room at the start of class.)

**Assignment Acceptance Policy:** Unless stated otherwise, all assignments are due by the date listed in the course schedule/syllabus. **Late assignments will lose one letter grade for each day they are late (including weekends).** If a situation arises in which you know an assignment will be late, please discuss this with me at least a week before it is due in order to make the necessary arrangements.

**Blackboard:** Course documents, schedules, assignments, discussion forums, communication, and secure file storage in the Content System are available through the Blackboard learning management system at <http://blackboard.vcu.edu> or through your VCU portal. You are required to check Blackboard on a regular basis and are completely responsible for the consequences of not reading announcements, assignments, or other posts in a timely fashion. The library has computers with Internet connections available for student use. If you have technical difficulties with Blackboard, VCU email, or your computer, it is your responsibility to resolve those difficulties through the appropriate channels in a timely manner. The technology help desk can be reached at 828-2227 or <http://www.ts.vcu.edu/helpdesk.html>.

**Attendance Policy:** This course requires prepared, active participation during class sessions.

- The instructor has the right to lower a student's final course grade as the sole result of his or her repeated absences and tardiness.
- While attendance is mandatory, students should not expect to do well simply by attending.
- Being absent from class does not relieve students of responsibility for completing all course work by the scheduled due dates.
- Students who miss more than 25% of the classes will automatically fail. **In a two-day/week course, this is 8 or more absences.**
- There are no "excused" or "unexcused" absences.
- Failing to complete your service project hours will translate to absences in the course.

#### University Policies:

**Email Policy:** Electronic mail or "email" is considered an official method for communication at VCU because it delivers information in a convenient, timely, cost effective, and environmentally aware manner. This policy ensures that all students have access to this important form of communication. It ensures students can be reached through a standardized channel by faculty and other staff of the University as needed. Mail sent to the VCU email address may include notification of University-related actions, including disciplinary action. Please read the policy in its entirety: <http://www.ts.vcu.edu/kb/3407.html>

#### **VCU Honor System: Plagiarism and Academic Integrity**

The VCU honor system policy describes the responsibilities of students, faculty, and administration in upholding academic integrity, while at the same time respecting the rights of individuals to the due process offered by administrative hearings and appeals. According to his policy, "members of the academic community are required to conduct themselves in accordance with the highest standards of academic honesty and integrity." In addition, "All members of the VCU community are presumed to have an understanding of the VCU Honor System and are required to:

- Agree to be bound by the Honor System policy and its procedures;
- Report suspicion or knowledge of possible violations of the Honor System;
- Support an environment that reflects a commitment to academic integrity;
- Answer truthfully when called upon to do so regarding Honor System cases, and,
- Maintain confidentiality regarding specific information in Honor System cases."

Most importantly, “All VCU students are presumed upon enrollment to have acquainted themselves with and have an understanding of the Honor System.” (The VCU INSIDER, VCU Honor System 131-132). The Honor System in its entirety can be reviewed on the Web at [http://www.provost.vcu.edu/pdfs/Honor\\_system\\_policy.pdf](http://www.provost.vcu.edu/pdfs/Honor_system_policy.pdf) or it can be found in the 2012-13 VCU Insider at <http://www.students.vcu.edu/insider.html>

**In this class, because coursework will be at times collaborative, particular issues of academic integrity arise. You should not copy or print another student’s work without permission. Any material (this includes IDEAS and LANGUAGE) from another source must be credited, whether that material is quoted directly, summarized, or paraphrased. In other words, you should respect the work of others and in no way present it as their own. In addition, I expect that all work submitted in this course (whether for an informal or formal assignment) to be original to this course and semester; submitting work written or used in a previous course/semester constitutes cheating, and may lead to dire consequences.**

**Student Conduct in the Classroom:** According to the *VCU Resource Guide*, “The instructional program at VCU is based upon the premise that students enrolled in a class are entitled to receive instruction free from interference by other students. Accordingly, in classrooms, laboratories, studies, and other learning areas, students are expected to conduct themselves in an orderly and cooperative manner so that the faculty member can proceed with their [sic] customary instruction. Faculty members (including graduate teaching assistants) may set reasonable standards for classroom behavior in order to serve these objectives. If a student believes that the behavior of another student is disruptive, the instructor should be informed.” Among other things, cell phones and beepers should be turned off while in the classroom. Also, the University Rules and Procedures prohibit anyone from having “... in his possession any firearm, other weapon, or explosive, regardless of whether a license to possess the same has been issued, without the written authorization of the President of the university...” See the *VCU Resource Guide* for more information: <http://www.students.vcu.edu/insider.html>

Certainly the expectation in this course is that students will attend class with punctuality, proper decorum, required course material, and studious involvement.

The *VCU Resource Guide* contains additional important information about a number of other policies with which students should be familiar, including Guidelines on Prohibition of Sexual Harassment, Grade Review Procedure, and Ethics Policy on Computing. It also contains maps, phone numbers, and information about resources available to VCU students. The *VCU Resource Guide* is available online at the link above or through the Division of Student Affairs.

### **Students with Disabilities**

**SECTION 504** of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 require that VCU provide an “academic adjustment” and/or a “reasonable accommodation” to any individual who advises us of a physical and/or mental disability. To receive accommodations, students must declare their need for disability-related accommodations with the Disability Support Services Office (DSS). The DSS office is located in the Student Commons, Room 102. The office phone number is 828-2253. The coordinator is Joyce Knight. More information is available at the Disability Support Services webpage:

<http://www.students.vcu.edu/dss/>

If you have a physical or mental limitation that requires an academic adjustment or accommodation, arrange a meeting with me at your earliest convenience. Additionally, if your coursework requires you to work in a lab environment, you should advise me or department chairperson of any concerns you may have regarding safety issues related to your limitation(s). This statement applies not only to this course but also to every other course in this University.

### **Statement on Military Short-Term Training or Deployment**

Military students may receive orders for short-term training or deployment. These students are asked to inform and present their orders to their professor(s). For further information on policies and procedures contact Military Services at 828-5993 or access the corresponding policies at <http://www.pubapps.vcu.edu/bulletins/about/?Default.aspx?uid=10096&iid=30704> and <http://www.pubapps.vcu.edu/BULLETINS/undergraduate/?uid=10096&iid=30773>.

### **Campus Emergency information**

What to Know and Do To Be Prepared for Emergencies at VCU:

1. Sign up to receive VCU text messaging alerts (<http://www.vcu.edu/alert/notify>). Keep your information up-to-date. Within the classroom, the professor will keep her phone on to receive any emergency transmissions.
2. Know the safe evacuation route from each of your classrooms. Emergency evacuation routes are posted in on-campus classrooms.
3. Listen for and follow instructions from VCU or other designated authorities. Within the classroom, follow your professor's instructions.
4. Know where to go for additional emergency information (<http://www.vcu.edu/alert>).
5. Know the emergency phone number for the VCU Police (828-1234). Report suspicious activities and objects.

### **Important Dates**

Important dates for the Fall 2013 semester are available at:

[http://academiccalendars.vcu.edu/ac\\_fullViewAll.asp?term=Fall+2012](http://academiccalendars.vcu.edu/ac_fullViewAll.asp?term=Fall+2012)

### **VCU Mobile**

The VCU Mobile application is a valuable tool to get the latest VCU information on the go. The application contains helpful information including the VCU directory, events, course schedules, campus maps, athletics and general VCU news, emergency information, library resources, Blackboard and more. To download the application on your smart phone or for more information, please visit <http://m.vcu.edu/>

## **Course Schedule Overview**

### **Unit One: Course Intro & Civic Expression –Weeks 1 - 6**

---

In this section, you will choose an issue that you would like to explore and address that will remain your area of inquiry for the rest of the semester (this issue will also serve as the basis for determining your service-learning project). You will explore the idea of social responsibility and use one of the strategies examined in this unit to address your issue. You will collaborate with team members to generate ideas for civic expression in relation to your issue (this will primarily be focused on starting your service project). Your group is encouraged to research potential avenues for partnering with community groups or reaching out to other university students. You will broaden your understanding of civic engagement.

**Inquiry Questions:** *What message do I want to send or what purpose do I want to pursue? What would be the most effective vehicle for that plan of action and why? Why is civic expression important? How is civic expression used to engender change? Is the individual or group voice more powerful? Why? What does true collaboration mean? How do we come to consensus? How does collaboration affect expression? Is it important for an individual to maintain autonomy within a group? Why or why not? How can we access community resources? How can we network with community entities? How do we become people that make a difference in our communities?*

**Major Assignments**

- “My Story” essay
- Unit I rationale
- Updates to course journal

**Unit Two: Cultural Expression –Weeks 7-10**

---

In this unit, you will examine more typically recognized methods for expressing ideas and constructing meaning. You will explore how visual, digital and rhetorical strategies are used in promoting social awareness and affecting change in our world. You might examine websites, advertisements, billboards, magazine covers, social media, letters, speeches, wikis and a variety of other vehicles for having a voice. You will then choose from the strategies that we have labeled textual expression, and develop a plan of action designed to address your chosen issue in some way.

**Inquiry Questions:** *How do we approach a text in assessing not only its meaning, but also its methods? How do visuals enhance rhetorical tracts? What kinds of messages are best sent through words, images, digitally? How does the delivery strategy of the message affect its meaning? How might it affect the impact of the message? What has to be considered in choosing a method of delivery? How does purpose affect rhetorical, visual and/or digital choice? How does audience affect rhetorical/visual or digital choice?*

**Major Assignments:**

- Unit II rationale
- Updates to course journal

**Unit Three: Textual Expression—Weeks 11-16**

---

You will examine an issue, concept, or event within a cultural context. You will explore cultural meaning and how cultural understanding can impact choices in purpose, audience and meaning. You will research potential cultural issues inherent in your chosen problem. You will reflect on cultural context and strategies in choosing another way to address the problem chosen at the beginning of the semester. You will also begin wrapping up your service project and group activities, and begin assessing the overall success of your endeavors in order to discuss and analyze them in a final paper.

**Inquiry Questions:** *How does considering the “larger” cultural contexts of a topic lead to greater critical understanding? How can exploring “expert” sources help one understand these larger contexts? How can cultural understanding enhance understanding of message and meaning? How can we use cultural literacy to examine our own biases and assumptions when trying to send messages that will be understood across cultures? How do our cultural values and beliefs affect our methods? How can understanding the cultural values of the audience shape our voices and expression? Why is cultural understanding important in achieving purpose in communication?*

**Major Assignments:**

- Unit III rationale
- Updates to course journal

- **Final Group Essay & Presentation**