

## **Libby Hemphill, School of Information, University of Michigan Teaching Statement**

I embrace teaching as an opportunity for me to empower my students and for me to learn along with them. At professional programs such as the School of Information (SI), Master's degree curriculums require balancing two goals: helping students develop skills specifically for their future work and teaching them how to think about problems so that they are prepared to adapt to changes during their careers. Successful teaching empowers students to use that new general knowledge in their specific professional activities. I have received consistently laudatory evaluations from faculty and students on my teaching and earned two teaching awards – the 2007 School of Information Outstanding Graduate Student Instructor (GSI) Award and the 2008 Rackham Graduate School Outstanding GSI Award. The Rackham Outstanding GSI Award is given yearly to just 20 of over 2200 GSIs from across the entire University.

I have the most experience teaching a course called *Social Systems and Collections* that introduces students to social theories of information. In this course I challenge students to engage material critically rather than encouraging them to merely memorize content. This skill, critical thinking, is invaluable for a broad range of occupations; the ability to examine concepts provides students a foundation for understanding and addressing new problems. Because they understand the essential aspects of information, my students are better prepared to adapt to changes in their careers – changes one could not anticipate and for which one cannot specifically train. I have also served as a Graduate Student Mentor (GSM) within the School of Information and as an orientation workshop leader for the University's Center for Research on Learning and Teaching (CRLT). As a GSM, I was responsible for training and supporting all of the School of Information's GSIs. At CRLT, I led workshops for first time GSIs. First-time GSIs are often nervous about being able to demonstrate confidence in front of their students, and I've found that using exercises such as brainstorming and role playing are effective ways to build their confidence. Those exercise give new GSIs the opportunity to demonstrate their skills and also provide me a chance to learn successful teaching approaches from my peers.

Respect for intellectual diversity and encouraging collaboration are complements to a focus on critical thinking and cornerstones of a successful education. I believe the kind of learning environment that best facilitates critical thinking relies on the diverse intellectual contributions and approaches of others. I use a variety of large-group discussions and small-group activities in my teaching. I design case-based exercises to help students develop abilities to analyze information in work contexts and in collaboration with others. For example, my students analyzed the Open CourseWare initiative while learning about intellectual property and social learning theory. I find that case exercises help bridge the potential gap between the course's focus on analyses of theories and the students' needs to prepare for professional practice.

I believe that it is my responsibility as an instructor to foster learning environments in which students call upon a variety of ways to view a particular situation and in which students come to value multiple perspectives. One important way I foster such intellectual diversity is by taking neutral stances on controversial or potentially disruptive material. Masters students who come to the School of Information bring with them a variety of educational and professional experiences, including systems design and library services, and I encourage students to discuss cases such as Google Book Search from those various perspectives. These exercises emphasizing the value of intellectual diversity prepare students to explore future challenges from a variety of perspectives and encourage them to develop innovative solutions to problems such as online book searching and digital preservation.

Respecting intellectual diversity also requires that as an instructor I take into account the varieties of ways in which students learn. I find that providing material in a variety of formats and using a range of teaching styles – including class discussion, role playing, and individual engagement – produces a positive learning environment in which all students can feel safe and supported. I use a variety of aptitude measures so that students have opportunities to

demonstrate their skills and to develop new ones. For example, when teaching *Social Systems and Collections*, I used classroom participation, short essay tests, and long paper writing to check for students' understanding. When training GSIs how to author assignments for their own courses, I've helped create short answer, concept mapping, and essay assignments. Using a variety of methods to check for understanding capitalizes on students' different sets of intellectual strengths and challenges students to develop skills where they have weaknesses.

In addition to helping students develop critical thinking skills in an atmosphere of intellectual diversity and collaboration, I believe remaining a student myself is paramount to being an effective teacher. I don't mean that I should always be taking courses, but to be a good teacher I have found that I must continually evaluate my own teaching and capitalize on opportunities to learn while teaching. Observing and helping other GSIs, reading student feedback on my teaching, and developing GSI training sessions all helped me examine my own teaching. I found taking time to consider students' feedback and learning to articulate teaching methods to other GSIs were invaluable in helping me improve as an instructor. Talking with other experienced teachers, engaging with students, and utilizing resources such as workshops and individual training available at CRLT all help me continue to improve as a teacher. Also, by engaging my students with material related to my own work, I learn to articulate my own ideas and research more clearly.

In conclusion, I believe that encouraging critical thinking, respecting intellectual diversity, and facilitating collaborative learning are fundamental to successful teaching. Doing so creates a learning environment in which students can learn the skills to process and generate information and to develop habits of using those critical thinking skills. Such an environment helps students to learn to be precise and logical, to communicate effectively and respectfully, and to carefully analyze information. These skills are requisite of our students whether they enter careers in information policy, library services, or another information field. My focus on learning, both my students' and my own, prepares me to teach a range of courses effectively to a diverse student body.