Transcript

[music]

Derek Bruff: This is "Leading Lines." I'm Derek Bruff. In this episode, we speak with Tia Smith, Bellsouth Professor of Mass Communication at Xavier University of Louisiana. Tia joined Xavier in 2015 as department head of mass communication and her research focuses on gender, race, sexuality, and media.

She has studied South African women freedom fighters and black women hip-hop fans, among other groups. Tia's background includes stints as a travel writer, journalist, and corporate communications consultant. She brings these diverse experiences to her work with students at Xavier, which has the distinction of being the only historically black and also Catholic institution of higher education in the US.

Tia was in Nashville for a conference, and she stopped by Vanderbilt to talk with me about the multimedia assignments she gives her students, the challenges her students face moving into professional work and the importance of critical theory and creative practice.

She has the most surprising answer yet, to our standard question about analog technology.

[background music]

Derek: Tia, tell me a little bit about you and what you do and what you teach?

Tia Smith: I am the head of mass communications at Xavier University. I teach courses like research methods, media law and ethics, media criticism, film appreciation, and I also [laughs] teach in the Women's Studies Department. It's a minor actually at Xavier.

I have joined the faculty at Xavier in 2015, from the University of the West Indies in Trinidad

and Tobago. That's where I actually first learned about and really began using technology in the classroom.

Trinidad, which is a very interesting [laughs] experience. That's a little bit about me.

Derek: I wanted to say thank you for stopping by to see us today. You're in town in Nashville for the story conference?

Tia: Yes, I am. [laughs]

Derek: Tell me what the story conference is?

Tia: I have never been. I'm looking forward to the space where creatives come together. Imagine the possibilities of how you can use stories to do a number of things whether it's business people telling or selling their brand or talking about who they are, as a company organization, or creatives using storytelling to share ideas about themselves or the world around them.

Or activists using stories to talk about issues that matter or they want to build a center or space of advocacy around. I'm excited to be in my element, and this year's theme is Wonder.

[laughter]

Tia: I'm wondering what that's going to look like. Everyone's saying, get prepared, get ready to feel the intensity of the possibilities of imagination. I'm all for it. I'm excited. [laughs]

Derek: I love it. I love storytelling and I love creative storytelling. I love visual storytelling. That's what I want to talk to you a little bit about because you've been using digital storytelling at various times in your teaching. Can you tell me a little bit about what that looks like in one or more of your courses?

Tia: Throughout all of my courses I incorporate visual storytelling, and that's because we have a mass communication background, and our curriculum is centered on multimedia concentration and multimedia application and tools and getting our students prepared for careers as a journalist or an entrepreneur or something like that.

We want to always incorporate those multimedia skills in our teaching and in our classroom. The problem is we don't always have access to the technology. How do we be creative…

[laughter]

Tia: …when students sometimes say, "Well, Dr. Tia, I don't have access to the Internet," or, "I have a low-grade smart phone. I can't do all those things in memory." That's the challenge because we make the assumption that everybody has access, and we're forgetting that not everybody has access.

We have to keep that in four, and this classroom them becomes a space where we're trying to build and create a sense of equity to access. In doing so, I teach a multiple methods of how to tell stories with your smart phone but also how to tell stories in groups. If one student has a smart phone, they'll do a group project.

It depends on the student population in the class how I use it. Then I'll talk a little bit more about what that actually is. [laughs] Some of the assignments…

Derek: The access thing is really important. You've got to know…

Tia: It's very important.

Derek: You've got to know your students and know what resources they have and what they have to bring, and you don't want students to feel put out or left out because they don't have the same tools that everyone else does. Other people do.

Tia: Right. And some of the students are…They say, "Well, I'm in university." It's a matter of shame for them to come forward and say, "Look, I can't do this. I want to be professional, but I do not have the tools, and I want to invest, but it's a money issue. I'm working two jobs. I've taking care of a family," or whatever the issue may be, the challenge may be.

"It doesn't mean that I don't want to be successful. It just means that I need a little bit of extra help. Well, can I work in the evenings?" A lot of our faculty are very open and coming in in the evenings and working with students after hours and working on the computers, making it accessible for those who do not have the technology that they need to be successful in the classroom.

Derek: Some of that is that you may have some tools on campus that are available, computer labs and stuff, but you need to able to be there when the students are there and can use them to help coach and mentor.

Tia: Right, because we're a small campus. We have three or four jobs in one. [laughs] We're the security. We open the doors.

Derek: [laughs]

Tia: We bring the lunch, whatever it is to get it done. It's all in the matter of being helpful to the students and wanting them to succeed, as well as balancing our own lives [laughs] outside of campus. It's really interesting.

Derek: You talked about the shame piece. How do you open up those conversations to students to make it OK for them to say, "Hey, I'm going to need another way to do this"?

Tia: Derek, I'm still trying to figure that out because it varies from student to student, but it's important to mention shame because there's an assumption that everyone has access. We're in a digital age, and you feel really pushed to the margin if you are anything less than. For example, my daughter's 14, and we saw Ariana Grande at the airport in New Orleans. Her phone is just a basic cellphone.

Derek: That's very exciting. [laughs]

Tia: It's very exciting for her, but it's funny because I said, "Well, go and see if she'll get a selfie." She was like, "Mom, I cannot pull out this phone to take a selfie with Ariana Grande. This is not appropriate. I can't do emojis, I can't do this." She was very embarrassed by the apparatus that she was using and trying to shame me, mom shame [laughs] for my cheapness.

Derek: I have a 14-year-old daughter. I understand this. [laughs]

Tia: It's like, "Oh, my God, Mom. Are you crazy? This is Ariana Grande. I cannot be embarrassed." Similarly, with students on a different level the student feels that they are being shamed because they're not prepared. You're expected to have certain things when you come to university, but it's also a place of privilege. We have these expectations around

what students should come with.

The books are expensive. The fees are expensive. They may sacrifice some bit of their life in time in order to make it happen, and sometimes we need to be little bit more patient in understanding that. For those who do not have, there is some shame associated with having those conversations about, "I don't have access. What do I do? How do I invest in myself?"

For example, we had a meeting with the students yesterday, and we introduced a film kit and said, "This film kit is about $100. If you go on Amazon, you can buy this microphone. You could buy this lens for your…" Small things, and say, "Over time, let's save $10." BeyoncÈ was just in town. How much were the BeyoncÈ tickets?

The BeyoncÈ tickets are $140. This is just 100 bucks. Let's put it in comparison. It's a very interesting conversation. You have to be very patient with students like that.

Derek: Tell me a little bit about the assignments then. What are the types of stories that you're asking students to produce?

Tia: Xavier's mission is based on social justice and for more just and humane society. As a feminist I take on the cause [laughs] very much. A lot of our assignments, particularly my assignments, deal with the element of creating spaces that are more humane, looking at people's lived experiences, challenges, and it could just be everyday experiences about life in New Orleans.

Some of the stories include looking at feminists and feminism in the Millennial age, what is the feminist's agenda for Millennials and how is that played out in the city of New Orleans. What does that look like? Students would then go into the city, take pictures and have visual essays of what they think represents feminism.

It's so abstract or sometimes can be very concrete. It depends on the creative lens of the student. In addition to that, we have students that use poetry. They blend art and visual art as well. They would record themselves writing poems about feminism, or writing poems about some type of social justice issue.

We do a lot of intersections with art, social justice issues, political issues, ideologies around what these things look like, ideologies of injustice and how do we make sense of it all within

an academic space, but also bringing in the community, as well as surrounding community.

That's what the assignments look like from a broader context. For a more specific context, it's basically I tell students we're going to do some digital ethnographies.

They may follow their favorite activist on Twitter and they will engage with that activist -- they'll retweet, they will know what's happening with that activist and they will have an assignment that would screenshot tweets, some things like that. They'll have a visual essay about that.

Then they will now retweet and create a campaign about this is what this activist is doing. What does the story look like? What is the digital presence of their favorite activist? Then they will begin to engage with the language that the activist use, so on different levels.

It depends on that class. In media criticism, we work a lot with digital activist in campaigns.

Derek: What are the goals of an assignment like that? Are you preparing students to do their own activism in digital spaces? Are you trying to make sense of how activism works?

Tia: I had this idea of hash tag of activism and how effective it is. I know it brings awareness, but then what? I always [inaudible 13:10] , "But then what?" I know it's important to have awareness, but is that awareness going to change policy? What are the real implications of awareness and how do we move from the digital space to the physical space?

That's what the assignment emerged out of. Making sense of, "OK, now you are an activist and you want..." or maybe you're not. Maybe you're just curious about the world, but how do we intersect and how do we engage our digital selves and our physical selves? What does that look like? How does one speak to the other? We're trying to figure it all out.

We all have no answers, but the assignment really gets them to be reflective, to contemplate the world around them and to really think about their digital space. It's not just about communicating, taking selfies. It's not just a "me" world, but what are you actually saying, what is your platform, and then how do they...?

Derek: How are you a part of the community? I'm sure it is.

Tia: How are you a part of a community to that, and then how do you create communities? Are you marginalized within those communities?

Because it's interesting how we look at digital communities and space in digital space and the occupation of that space, who has the platform and who has the voice, and who feels that they are muted, because there's an assumption that everyone has the opportunity to talk back. I don't think it's true. [laughs]

Derek: Right. I think that was briefly true in 1995.

Tia: Yeah.

[laughter]

Derek: Pretty much, the Internet was great.

Tia: Yeah, everybody could participate. Well, I don't know. People are being silenced all the time. Is that silence visual? Is that silence in terms how you tweet, if you're using a blog or a vlog, or some type of, I don't know, digital narrative? How are you then pushed to the margins? How are you discredited? How are you made meaningless or how are you made meaningful? In which ways do that matter?

Those are assignments coming out of my Media Criticism class because we look a lot at social media.

Derek: One of the things that we've explored in the podcast before is this relationship in a teaching environment between critique and creativity; that often you can have students create something so that they become better critics or vice versa.

Tia: Right. I think that's very important, Derek, because the students need to understand how art is created, how work is created, so that they could understand the pieces within it. They can examine that as creators and as producers, and as consumers of the media or of social media, or of existing in these different spaces.

It's really important because it helps them to think critically about why I chose to frame a photo this way. What am I trying to convey? What intent, maybe am I trying to encode in that

particular image. Why am I using a particular tool, particular mechanism, digital tool in the classroom? What am I trying to get you to do to engage?

For example, I had a conversation with my colleagues last night and we were talking about doing an online class. We were having some problems with bandwidth. "Just kill the video. Let's just use audio." They said, "Well, what about intimacy?"

Because audio is one thing, and we know you could have a static picture up there, but the dynamism of video helps you feel like you belong to a community in way that maybe audio does not. We have all these conversations about it, but when will you begin to understand choice and agency, and how you put together the story with the technology, then you become more considerate of it.

Derek: Particularly, when you're asking students to produce something, digital story of some sort, what do they find hard about that? What's challenging for students?

Tia: To produce something…With having a professor like myself, they always want to please me around what they think I want. The challenge for them is, "What do I think she want so I can get an A?" Instead of thinking about what do you want to create, and trying to negotiate, "Well, there's an A on a grade on this, so I'm going to give her what she wants," versus, "This is what I would actually like to investigate," or, "This is what I actually want to do."

And so for the first and second year students that becomes a challenge, "How do I get the A?" For the juniors and seniors it's a little bit more agency and a little bit more, "I know what I'm doing. I'm pretty confident. She taught me some things but now I have it, so I'm letting go of the apron string," or the string so to speak.

But that's the challenge for students think "What do I do? What next? If I'm giving you an open field, where do I go? Where do I run?"

We have to real them in and say "These are some topics that you can consider." Even then, they're still confused to the very last minute. [laughs] "I don't know what to do," and they're freaking out.

Over time, as they progress through the program, they become a little bit more savvy. They become a little bit more comfortable with the technology.

Some students are a little bit timid about the technology because we also assumed the digital natives, they know everything already we don't have to teach them how to use the technology, but we do.

We have to teach them how to use it properly. There's a use of it…

[crosstalk]

Derek: Thoughtfully. Yeah. I run into this. Just because you follow a communion on Twitter or you put some selfies on Snapchat…That's a drop in the bucket. There's a lot of other things you can do with technology.

Often in an academic setting, we're asking students. Maybe we're asking them to use Twitter or Snapchat but the purpose is completely different. They quickly get outside of their comfort zone.

Tia: Right. Even the language becomes different as well. If they're tweeting about themselves or usually…I'm sorry, my students don't tweet as much because Twitter is for the older generation. [laughs]

Derek: This is what my teenager tells me.

Tia: "Mamma, be on Twitter," like "Come on."

Facebook is not even a consideration anymore.

Derek: Those are for our grandparents. [laughs]

Tia: Right. Grandma's following me on Facebook now. [laughs] That's not going to happen.

If it's a different platform, how then do I use language? If my professor's looking at my Snapchat or my Instagram and she's following my pictures on Instagram, how do I post those videos? What do I say? How do I professionalize that?

It's a different type of conversation. It's a different type of digital representation that I'm having and a digital conversation with my professor, so the language shifts as well. The

content shifts, and so, you get different posts from the…I guess the fun stuff that they like to post with concerts, food, just the everyday things about "I am great," and then, more a sort of thoughtful…

Derek: [laughs] Wait…

Tia: Yeah. With everything, it's like, "I am great."

Derek: That's your average 14-year-old Instagram? It's just, "I am great"?

Tia: "I am great," which is just great, [laughs] but as a college student, they become more thoughtful about what they're posting. They say, "Wait a minute. I'm going to apply for a job soon. Somebody may look at my Instagram." [laughs]

Derek: Right. How can I create a digital identity that actually represents me well and shows that I have things to offer?

Tia: It's a shift that happens from high school to college, that they quickly learn…maybe by the sophomore year. [laughs] It takes some time. As they get more serious in it, they mature into the program.

Derek: There's a lot of digital tools that one could use to tell stories. You mentioned familiarity is one factor. Are there other factors or objectives that you consider when you're pointing students toward one set of tools over another? Or, "For this assignment, it's going to look like this so we're going to use these tools"?

Tia: Yes and no. Usually, it depends on what students are comfortable with. For example, in my Women in Media course, I gave the assignment of…students to creatively use a fictitious character named Della. Della Reese had just passed. She was one of my favorite actresses and performers, and I said to them, "Oh, I owe it to Della. We're going to do something about Della."

They had no idea who Della Reese was… [laughs]

Derek: Fair enough.

Tia: ...so after an education of who Della Reese was, I said, "Come on. Let's do something. You can choose how you want to represent this feminist superhero." Some students chose to do a podcast.

Derek: You said superhero?

Tia: Superhero.

Derek: OK. All right.

Tia: Superhero. They interpreted it in a number of different ways. Some students chose to do a podcast about Della, and it was an exchange where folks would call in, and talk about feminist concepts, and talk about representation, and talk about what happened at the party. What do I do?

They're talking about the Me Too movement, and then others used essay, photographs, about images of Della, and what a superhero looks like. It was very much an embodied extreme close up of fingernails, of hands, of feet...

[crosstalk]

Derek: Photos that they created themselves?

Tia: Photos that they created themselves. Another student, a small group, they created a mini film where there was an actual superhero, who had long hair, and her hair was power.

Derek: [laughs]

Tia: She would go through campus fighting crime right there. It was a cool assignment of how they...I didn't tell them which tools to use. I just said, "This is what we're going to do." I'm calling it a media anthology, a digital media anthology. "You choose which you want to do with your groups, and let's see what happens."

At first, they were a little bit timid and intimidated by the space of options, but then they got into it. In fact, what was interesting about this course is that, it was interdisciplinary. I have Psychology students, Biology students, Mass Communications students, Political Science

students, and one student from Public Health.

They all got together and talked about from their different disciplinary lens. How can we create something around feminist, around Della, around what it means to be a superhero, because all of those things are interpretive, and use media and technology to present that?

Some shows podcast, others shows more visual mediums, others show still photography, and it worked out pretty well. I was very pretty happy about that. [laughs]

Derek: Let me ask the question that I always hear when I share examples of assignments like this. How do you grade something like that?

Tia: Yes, that was the problem.

[laughter]

Derek: What are you looking for and how do you...?

Tia: I'm in a Woman in Media course. I was looking for one group collaboration, like the leadership, that they include all the elements that they talk about, some of the concepts that we talked about in class, representation, and things like that, in terms of theories and concepts that we discussed, that had to be included somewhere within the presentation.

In addition, how creative they were in terms of using technology. If they did a podcast, what type of questions were they asking? Did they follow the time limit? Simple things around instructions because that's important when you're doing a podcast or any type of digital media piece. Time is very, very important, but also content and research.

Did they include research? Were the ideas connected to some other body of work? That research had to be connected to some type of digital ethnography or digital understanding of how to present various concepts, some of the readings in class.

They had three elements. In grading that, I looked at whether those elements were present and to what extent. It was a Likert scale. I gave a overall summative comment, but it was very difficult because some would do very, very well. This film was fantastic.

[laughter]

Tia: This woman run at the campus. The podcast was also creative and meaningful in a way that the film wasn't. The different approaches were very creative, but the podcast allow for more discussion and language around dissecting feminism on campus. If the students even believe the cause of feminism, opposing questions.

Derek: Gotcha. Some of the projects were able to represent a level of analysis or a level of argumentation that was maybe stronger than other projects.

Especially with these open-ended projects, I find that often, faculty will assign them and they're so impressed at how varied they are, how creative they are and how cool it is. Their response is to say, "Well, it's all great."

You want it to be great. Sometimes, they are all great. But we also have an obligation to help students understand how they're making arguments. Are they making appropriate arguments? What's the strength, are they using the tools in really creative ways? Is there a good match between their medium and their message?

There are ways to be really analytical about this. It sounds like you were able to parse it out into these three big areas.

Tia: No, don't get me wrong. I said, "Everything's great."

[laughter]

Tia: But I had to step back and say, "Everything was different." I didn't want to compare the projects. But in terms of the three elements that I was looking for, to what extent were they developed within the project? I had my rubric but I just thought everything was great...

Derek: [laughs]

Tia: ...but some were much more analytical, much more sophisticated than others.

Derek: Did you have them present in class or share out in some way?

Tia: Yeah. We had a mini-festival, so we invited some other classes down and some of the professors to come to our lab, our TV studio. We aired the podcast. We had popcorn. We had the film showing, and students were very excited.

We're also having a small film festival in the spring. Hopefully, they will be shown there as well, at the local community center.

Derek: On our podcast, we try to explore the future of educational technology. That's a pretty big space. As you look ahead to, say, five years out, what would you want to see, in terms of educational technology in higher ed?

Tia: One of the biggest challenges we have is equity. I would like to see more equity across the board from university to university.

Some schools have more resources. Their students are better prepared for the new technologies as they come out, as they roll out. They have a better understanding of how to use them and how to integrate them into the various spaces, whether it's business or creative spaces, or whatever type of job that they may have.

Other schools are under-resourced. Perhaps in five years, I would like to see more equitable distribution of resources. Maybe that's idealistic. But you said, "What would you like to see?" [laughs]

Derek: Yes. I'm asking you to make wishes here. [laughs]

Tia: I'm making a big wish for equity. I'm making a wish for more faculty to get on board the digital train, and not to feel left out...Faculties who've been teaching for 10, 15, 20 years that say, "I'm not doing that. I'm sticking with my chalkboard," which is fine. It has its place and is very meaningful.

Also, if you integrate the small things in your classroom, you can see the difference in the students because you're speaking a language that they may be familiar with.

It helps better prepare them for the world that they're going to be living in. Maybe, to not be so stubborn, [laughs] a little bit. To be a little bit open and have those conversations.

You'll have the center for teaching and learning here, as well as we have at Xavier. We should take advantage of those opportunities and go. I think everyone at those centers are ready to show you about all the wonderful tools and to teach you...

Derek: Yes, we are. Yes, we are.

Tia: ...slowly but surely, I'm learning it.

Derek: Intentionally, too -- using tools in ways that really help your students learn in ways you want them to. Not every tool is great, and not every tool is great for every purpose. Often, there are some tools that can be leveraged and relate into drawings.

Tia: For example, we use Brightspace at Xavier.

Derek: We do, too. We switched last year.

Tia: We did as well. It's fantastic. When you're grading your assignments, you can leave a voice note.

I find it fantastic, because the old way of grading, I have to write out everything and it takes forever. Now, I just have my rubric in front of me and I speak to the student. Or I can leave them a small video of me grading them. It's almost as if they're in my office.

Tia: A student wrote me back the very first time I did that with her assignment. She said, "This was great. I got exactly what you're saying. Sometimes your handwriting isn't so good..."

[laughter]

Tia: "This works really well, because I really can see how you used the rubric in grading my work, and I can see how I can improve it. You spoke to me as if I was in your office."

That tool right there is a life-saver. It's a life-changer. It saves time. It's great. It's awesome. I think that every faculty member...

Derek: [laughs]

Tia: …could use it to really enhance their student and teacher interaction as well. Students were like, "Wow, so you took the time just talking to me." They can replay it over and over again. That's the best part about it.

Derek: I have 15 papers to grade this week, so I may actually try that. [laughs]

Tia: I think it's a life saver, because…

Derek: I'll spend 20 minutes trying to type out some feedback to the students where it may be easier for me, too, just to speak into a microphone for five minutes and tell them what I saw on their paper.

Tia: Exactly. I have the rubric there. I may read through the paper first, and I have some mental notes, or a few notes. Then I'll talk about it as I'm reading it. It's just like the student is in your office hours and you're walking him through it, step by step.

First, one, let's go to the first paragraph. This is where you need to this, and this is what you did well. Always give them the sandwich method. "You're great, let's work on this, and you're great," and continue that type of thing. Students really appreciate that. I only had one student who didn't like it so much because she said, "This is new…"

Derek: [laughs]

Tia: …"What are you doing? Why are you…?"

Derek: Welcome to the world.

Tia: Yeah. I am pro-voice note. [laughs]

Derek: That's great. One last question…and we ask this of most of our guests, actually. We focus a lot on digital educational technology in our podcasts. Do you have a favorite analog educational technology that you like to use?

Tia: No.

[laughter]

[clapping noise]

Tia: I'm thinking, "No. Do I have to give the answer?"

[laughter]

Derek: No. We've never gotten a no before. I'm loving this.

Tia: No. I know. No. No, no. I don't have a favorite. No. That's it. [laughs]

Derek: Fair enough.

Tia: I don't have one.

Derek: The digital tools give you what you need, right?

Tia: They do. It makes life a little bit easier for me as a professor. It helps with the students as well, as long as they have access to that. It really helps with our engagement. It helps with our understanding. It helps with students who may learn differently. Instead of the read, write, you have visual, you have audio. All of those things are happening and can meet the various needs of each learner.

I find digital is the way. I'm totally sold. Bye-bye analog. [laughs]

Derek: [laughs]

Tia: Good-bye. [laughs]

[background music]

Derek: All right. [laughs] Well, thank you, Tia. This has been a lovely conversation. Thank you for talking with us today.

Tia: Thank you. Thank you for having me. I appreciate it.

Derek: That was Tia Smith, Bellsouth Professor of Mass Communication at Xavier University of Louisiana. I really appreciated how thoughtful she was, about assessing her students'

digital projects, in her practical approach to the resource challenges her students face.

I met Tia through Elizabeth Yost Hammer, the Director of the Center for the Advancement of Teaching and Faculty Development at Xavier.

Tia participated in a faculty learning community at the Center last year, one focused on teaching with technology. I've been reaching out to a few teaching center directors to ask for suggestions for Leading Lines interviews and when I reached out to Elizabeth I realized we had corresponded about podcasts before 10 years ago.

Back in 2008, I was an assistant director here at the Vanderbilt Center for Teaching and I had just launched our first podcast which is no longer around actually. Elizabeth had launched a podcast at her center that year, too, but it's still going strong 10 years later. That's a lot of longevity for a podcast. It's called "Teaching, Learning and Everything Else" and you can find a link to it in the show notes.

To find our show notes as well as past episodes with full transcripts, visit our website leadinglinespod.com. We're on Twitter and Facebook, too, just search for "Leading Lines" podcast.

We would love to hear from you. Leading lines is produced by The Vanderbilt Center for Teaching, The Vanderbilt Institute for Digital Learning, The Office of Scholarly Communications at the Vanderbilt Libraries and The Associate Provost for Education Development and Technologies.

This episode was edited by Rhett McDaniel. Look for new episodes the first and third Monday of each month. I'm your host Derek Bruff, thanks for listening.

[music]

Transcription by CastingWords