

Praxis Initiative Immerses Students in Art, Technology, Theory

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Most students and professors in the DU community are aware of a concept that they know is true, but may not be able to name. It's the idea that classroom knowledge with multimodal, hands-on practice makes for a fuller education. Likewise, so does learning how fields interact with other disciplines and with the public at large.



DU's College of Arts, Humanities & Social Sciences (CAHSS) is investing time, energy, and resources in the fundamental theory behind those ideas. The theory that learning involves critical, public-facing application across disciplines is called praxis, and it's been around since ancient Greece.

"Praxis [essentially] means the intersection of theory and practice and how they inform and embody each other," said Trace Reddell, associate professor of emergent digital practices. "Most importantly, working in praxis means gaining the ability to engage with other people and communicate across differences."

Members of the DU community, including Reddell, believe in the concept of praxis so strongly that they're transforming both the present and future of academic life at DU. Supported by the [Keystone Strategic Plan](#) and the [John Madden Center for Innovation in the Liberal and Creative Arts](#), praxis is providing a wide array of opportunities to engage students and faculty. Reddell and the rest of the praxis cohort — professors W. Scott Howard (English & literary arts), Thomas Nail (philosophy), and Michael Caston (mechanical and materials engineering in the Ritchie School of Engineering and Computer Science) — have already been implementing the idea into coursework, in part to allow students to get a taste of how praxis can change learning for the better.

Howard, for his 2000-level Shakespeare Seminar, emphasized elements in Shakespeare's plays (focusing on *Hamlet*) such as their printing history, contemporary book arts practices, dramatic performances, cosmology, and critical theory. Students produced a dynamic variety of projects, including everything from internet memes and video adaptations to collaborative performances and research papers.

"For me, the idea was to study Shakespeare's work from a cross-disciplinary perspective and also to amplify a multimodal approach," Howard said.

In his Sound Cultures course within emergent digital practices, Reddell had his students engage in what he calls a "guided walk." He asked them to listen to their surroundings with their ears as they normally would, and then to apply field recording equipment to listen with "magnified" ears, thinking about how they navigate through the world sonically.

"[The guided walks] kind of became the first attunement, in a way," Reddell said. "And then we would start morphing that into a way of creating with sound. The final project was the student [creating] a long-form audio essay, radio play, or more of a podcast style where they interviewed other people."

Nail, for his 2000-level Aesthetics & Philosophy of Art course, asks his students to break out of the visual paradigm of philosophical metaphors and apply the other senses to engage the world critically.

"Aesthetics typically asks, 'What is art?' but this leads us to universal theories or paradoxes of undefinability," Nail said. "Instead I think we should ask the question, 'What does art do?'"

As part of this goal to promote praxis, professors Howard, Nail, Reddell, and Caston are leading a variety of events focused on preparing students to incorporate new and emerging technologies and practices across disciplinary fields through the study of critical theory.

On July 25-26, the [Making Media Matter Summer Symposium](#) will feature on- and off-campus discussions and presentations of transdisciplinary works. Keynote speakers and performers include Dr. Bruce Clarke, professor of literature & science and Blumberg chair of astrobiology at the Library of Congress, as well as creative coder and interactive experience designer Synthestruct (Ginger Leigh).

"In particular, we are looking for makers, practitioners, and scholars interested in collaborating across the arts, humanities, and sciences — with a sensitivity to the materiality of their methods, media, and praxis," Howard said.

Professors Reddell, Howard, and Nail will also be teaching a groundbreaking multimodal Keystone Experience — co-taught as a 3000-level course — in the fall quarter 2019.

The mission of the class is to incorporate new and emerging technologies and practices across disciplinary fields, and allow opportunities for students to make their work accessible to a broad audience. Students can engage in dialogues, workshops, rapid design prototypes, games, collaborative performances, and more, to truly make the course an immersive experience rather than a traditional course.



"We're looking to bring together students who are interested in a variety of different areas and practices, and just encourage them to be reflective on what they're doing, to collaborate with each other across disciplines," Reddell said.

"Praxis is an example of what can happen when you give creative and energetic faculty from a variety of disciplines the freedom to dream, and the support to make those dreams a reality," said Derigan Silver, faculty director of the Madden Center. "I'm excited to see what is produced from this truly collaborative effort. In addition, I can't wait to see how this effort builds a framework for future collaborations among CAHSS's many departments, schools, and centers, and other areas of the University of Denver."