

Script for This I Believe Presentation—Digital Learning

By Joanna Smitherman Trapp

Slide 1—Hello! I'm Joanna Trapp. Welcome to this presentation about how to create a useful and effective digital assignment teaching writing and other communication skills for students. Using an example from my class on Oral Communication, I share and explain how I adapted the well-known This I Believe essay, incorporating it into my class as the first major assignment. Even though I used it for my speech class, this assignment or some version of it would be extremely useful in any course in which the teacher desired students to gain experience in using their voices and words as a tool of communication.

Slide 2—In this presentation, we'll first talk about the background and history of the This I Believe series. Then I'll share my assignment and how I helped students invent a topic for their own essays. Key to this assignment working are including help with drafting and planning workshops on the drafts for revision purposes. We will also discuss how to support students in recording, editing, and posting their audio readings of their essays. Finally, I'll cover other matters of interest to teachers and share why I think this sort of assignment matters in student learning.

Slide 3—This I Believe is a real cultural phenomenon in this country. Beginning as a regular radio show in the 1950s, it garnered a significant audience which loved and valued the series for its attention to things that mattered—values and beliefs. Each episode gave a glimpse of what lay at the base of a person who often was well-known by the public. 758 essays were recorded from 1951-1954 and can be found on NPR's website. The country was facing tough times and hard decisions during these years, and the positive outlook of the series was a reminder of the values that made us all Americans....and human. Later NPR rebooted the series, and the website now contains over 125,000 essays by both known people and ordinary people. No longer accepting essays, NPR has put up many educational tools, encouraging faculty in all educational settings to freely use the model of writing and talking about values. Books of the essays are also available.

Slide 4—The assignment I'm sharing with you has students draft, revise, and edit a short essay using the models provided on the NPR website. It's an exercise that allows for group and individual developmental feedback and is a perfect vehicle for post-assignment feedback, self-assessment and reflection. As a communication exercise, students have the opportunity to practice exclusive meta-thinking about the rhetorical canon of delivery and how their voice comes across to a real audience of listeners. It's also a good first exercise to allow them to practice delivery without the all-too-real jitters of an in-person speech before a live audience (or facing a camera in an online class). Finally, the assignment allows for multi-modal composing in audio form, written form, and visual form. Students have the opportunity to take one composition and explore how communication work in various genres!

Slide 5—If you look at the materials and handouts associated with this presentation, you'll see that the first item I give the students is a one-pager that provides some background on This I Believe and then makes this statement that you see here. I do not roll out the particulars of the assignment, nor do I give them the whole packet. I want them to first, know why this value-laden assignment is important and how it gives them a chance to exercise their public voice about

something close to them. Rather than focusing on deadlines and what to do, I'm scaffolding in first getting them to care about the assignment and creating a desire to explore.

Slide 6—I then give them an assignment to listen to several essays. I let them know that during the next class, I'll be asking for comments about what they notice, hear, similarities and differences. And we'll listen to a few that I've selected as well. We spend a good part of the next class just thinking about why these recordings are so affecting. And we'll use a handout to facilitate discussion.

Slide 7—That handout is the Invention exercise. Invention is always the first stage of any staged assignment. The teacher needs to assume that the students need help getting from the assignment to actually creating a topic/idea/research area and beginning. Aristotle called this Invention, and it is one of the canons of rhetoric. How can you as a teacher provide a class exercise (or out of class exercise) that guides students into finding (or discovering!) something to work on? Here's my attempt to facilitate that. You'll see that as a group we investigate the ins and outs of the personal essay and how to tell a compelling narrative. Then they have group time to talk about ideas that might lead to the next scaffolded step of this assignment—The Credo assignment.

Slide 8—You'll also see a handout for the Credo Assignment in the materials accompanying this presentation. The step of the project gives the students a prompt to write a 200 word personal creed. The discussion provided by the handout gives background on creeds and their importance, and then finally links are provided for them to explore and learn more. Note that this is a low stakes assignment and meant to get them thinking about a potential topic for their speeches. These creedal statements are shared with their groups and a few are discussed when the class meets. All should be posted on the LMS so that all the good ideas can be viewed by all in case any student needs to rethink their own topic.

Slide 9—The handouts for the drafting of the assignment (based on the Credo short writing) and for the formal workshop with a partner in which they read their essay out loud is included in the materials provided. Note, that it is now that they see their final assignment. They are encouraged to think about how to read/speak for a public audience on the web, as well as how they will create reliable ethos or credibility. I always require that the workshop sheet is included with the packet they hand back to me at the completion of the assignment. I also expect for them to reflect on this whole project and account for how they did or did not take advice from their partner and what difference it made.

Slide 10—In the materials you'll find a handout about how to do recording and editing on Audacity. Depending on time available in class, I will sometimes bring in our Instructional Technologist to help them get started with Audacity. Or sometimes I will do it. You might even consider developing or finding videos to link into the LMS. This exercise teaches them how to use Audacity and to do preliminary editing on an audio track. Students select a picture to accompany their speech/essay and have the option of adding a musical track to their final version. Editing is all-important so that the speech/essay fits the time restrictions of the assignment as well. Because the essay is mounted on the professor's class website, students must make decisions about whether to allow their names to accompany the essay, and they learn from the professor about embedding attribution for photos and about permission forms to make their

essays public. Once the essays are ready, they have an example of their abilities as storytellers on the web, easily referenced on resumes and letters via a hyperlink.

Slide 11—One of the best features of this assignment is how it gets students ready for the rest of the course in a perhaps unexpected medium in a speech class—digital recording and editing—with a clear focus on delivery and the voice, something that often gets short. This assignment really solidifies how words shape the reading and meaning.

The focus on a variety of literacy skills in a multimodal assignment (written, spoken, aural, pictorial, and even the visual of the editing line which reproduces the audio in an editable format), addresses the need, as laid out in scholarship, for assignments to use more than just an alphabetic textual approach in assignments. No matter *how* students learn best, the assignment allows flexibility for students to “get” the assignment in a way suited to them. The students can read the assignments, listen or read the model texts, watch the instructional video recorded of the class, or can rely on audio or alphabetic texts primarily to do the assignments.

The assignment validates (important according to Woodley, et. al.) student values and worth by allowing them to write and speak about something close to them. The class’s response to the essay equally shows them that the values are shared, and in fact, these values begin to shape the culture of the whole class. Beginning with an assignment grounded in ethics and values changes the class throughout the semester.

While students can ask for help with recording and editing from the college’s digital learning unit, becoming proficient enough for this assignment is quite easy and doesn’t take much time. Students report that more time was invested in rerecording so that their reading was smooth and conveyed the tone they wished. Technology mastery shouldn’t be the goal of the assignment. This assignment provides a discreet way that allows for practice and focus on the literacy learning goals of importance in your class.

One of the key features that makes this assignment work well that it allows students to post their reflections on the project either as part of the website posting of the essay or as an assignment posted to a discussion board in the LMS. Students are asked to work closely with their peers and post responses and feedback. Then in subsequent synchronous meetings of the class, we listen to each essay as the students share a brief summary of their reflection with oral feedback and questions from the class. This is worth every bit of synchronous time given to it.

Slide 12—If you are curious and would like to review some of the products the students produced, as well as the introductory essay I wrote and mounted, check out my website. You’ll also find all these materials posted in my teaching portfolio as well. Links are provided for both. Thanks for coming along this journey with me. I hope this has sparked ideas for your own teaching!