It’s a typical muggy Nashville afternoon in late August, and the fall semester is just getting under way. Rain threatens as students scurry back from lunch across 21st Avenue to the Vanderbilt campus, intent on getting to their next class on time. At 1:10 p.m. sharp in a small room on the second floor of Calhoun Hall, Vanderbilt professor John Sloop launches into discussion of his favorite topic—television.

Not surprising, since Sloop, head of the Department of Communication Studies since 2005, holds a B.S. in media/advertising from Appalachian State University, a master’s in speech communication from the University of Georgia, and a Ph.D. in communication studies from the University of Iowa. He is an acknowledged expert on the rhetoric of the mass media, with 15 years’ teaching experience, dozens of published articles, and several books to his credit.

What is a bit surprising is that the 16 freshmen in Sloop’s seminar are there to hone their writing skills to college level through a study of the hit television series *Lost*. Ah, a softball class with a pop-culture hook, you say. Well, hold on to that remote for just a second.

The class isn’t more than a few minutes old when Sloop has introduced in rapid succession authors like Marshall McLuhan (“the medium is the message”) and concepts like Paul Du Gay’s “circuit of culture.” He also references *The Electronic Hearth* by Vanderbilt professor Cecelia Tichi and Neil Postman’s *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, both seminal books about television and its effect on culture. Not exactly the sources quoted in *TV Guide* or *Entertainment Weekly*. Then, just as the “uh-oh, what kind of course have I signed up for” look begins to flicker in the students’ eyes, Sloop almost winks at them with the question, “What character would you have killed off on *Lost* by now?” A light discussion ensues before Sloop steers the class back into deeper waters.

Ultimately, it becomes clear the issues Sloop will ask these freshmen to confront during the coming months may be as confounding as those facing the castaways on *Lost* itself. Like that fictional group of strangers thrown together on an apparently deserted island in a remote corner of the Pacific and faced with the common goal of survival, Sloop’s class also will form a community and develop the skills and self-discipline necessary to survive—and thrive—in Vanderbilt’s challenging academic environment.

“Lessons from *Lost*: A Case Study Introduction to Cultural Studies” is one of more than 80 first-year writing seminars designed to launch entering students into a new academic and social order.

“This course works on a number of levels to do that,” Sloop explains. “First, students learn to write at college level. Second, the course eases the transition into college because of the small class size and the fact that students get to choose a topic they are passionate about—and that also gives them a built-in community a couple times a week.”

Indeed, only one student in Sloop’s class has never watched *Lost* and most, like Sloop himself, are avid fans who eagerly discuss characters and plot details from the past two seasons and speculate about what the third season will bring.

Still, as Sloop stresses in his overview of the course, this is not a class about a popular television show but rather one that will “utilize *Lost* in order to think about and criticize relationships between and among mass media, culture, economics, production and consciousness or ideology.” To do this...

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**Lost in Translation**

John Sloop uses a hit television show to help students navigate the maze of mass media, culture and consciousness. **By Angela Fox**
lost works with a transnational group of characters who reflect all sorts of questions of age, race, gender and even size politics,” says Sloop. “Other shows aren’t so explicitly tied to these questions.”

The question of genre and the media is one that has long interested Sloop. His book Disciplining Gender: Rhetorics of Sex Identity in Contemporary U.S. Culture was published by The University of Massachusetts Press in 2004. He is currently working on a project that investigates the relationship between gender, sexuality, citizenship and transportation technologies (such as DVD players in cars) as media. The first essay emerging from this work will be published in Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies, a respected professional journal for which Sloop has been named editor-elect for volumes to be published between 2007 and 2009.

Sloop also is co-author with Kent A. Ono of Shifting Borders: Rhetoric, Immigration and California’s Proposition 187, published by Temple University Press in 2002. “John’s approach to rhetorical studies is unique,” says Ono, director and professor of Asian American studies and professor of the Institute of Communications Research at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. “While deeply grounded within classical rhetorical studies, his approach acknowledges, indeed nuances, post-structural and cultural studies approaches to the discipline.”

“Sloop’s far-ranging interests, aside from television and its influences, include Marlon Brando, Thelonious Monk and Iowa Buckeye basketball, to name a few. His ability to relate so many topics—and refract them through the lens of mass media and cultural studies—is the key to his appeal as a teacher.

“With a class like Sloop’s Rhetoric of the Mass Media, the most valuable lesson for me was learning to look at television, media and cultural studies is a testament to his overall communication is the essence of humanity,” Sloop says. “If our reality is in large part ideas that range widely as a thinker and critic.” Sloop’s far-ranging interests, aside from television and its influences, include Marlon Brando, Thelonious Monk and Iowa Buckeye basketball, to name a few. His ability to relate so many topics—and refract them through the lens of mass media and cultural studies—is the key to his appeal as a teacher. "With a class like Sloop’s Rhetoric of the Mass Media, the most valuable lesson for me was learning to look at television, media and cultural studies is a testament to his overall communication is the essence of humanity," Sloop says. "If our reality is in large part ideas that range widely as a thinker and critic." Sloop’s far-ranging interests, aside from television and its influences, include Marlon Brando, Thelonious Monk and Iowa Buckeye basketball, to name a few. His ability to relate so many topics—and refract them through the lens of mass media and cultural studies—is the key to his appeal as a teacher. "With a class like Sloop’s Rhetoric of the Mass Media, the most valuable lesson for me was learning to look at television, media and cultural studies is a testament to his overall communication is the essence of humanity," Sloop says. "If our reality is in large part ideas that range widely as a thinker and critic."