

Vote for Journalism: A Real-World Project to Build Reporting and Writing Skills

Instructors ask students in introductory journalism courses to learn a range of skills in one semester – news values, interviewing, multimedia skills, critical thinking, the importance of context, maybe data journalism, and writing and story structure. Our hurdles include getting the students to utilize these skills while connecting them in a meaningful way.

This voting/election exercise helps students work with many journalistic tools while producing real journalism. It is a class project that relies on individual reporting. It helps students understand how journalists gather information, analyze it and then share it with readers. The students were taking Multimedia Journalism, an intro reporting course, in Oklahoma State's School of Media & Strategic Communications. Their effort resulted in an article published in our local newspaper, the Stillwater News Press.

"We were thrilled to have this article made available to the News Press," the manager editor, Beau Simmons, wrote to me. "We found results of the students' survey and coverage of the survey very insightful. It helped us shape our coverage of the primary as it relates to college-age voters."

The students became more comfortable with interviewing, working with numbers and structuring a story.

"I can't believe that many people talked to me on the record!" one student said after the project.

The project can take two to three weeks, depending on the number of students and lecture and lab times.

This was a lecture class of 30 students, divided into two separate labs. During Fall 2015, the class followed election polling and coverage – was Trump really ahead in polls, or was he ahead among voters with a preference? What is margin of error? After I checked with the campus student publication to ensure we didn't overlap coverage, the class embarked on its own survey.

PRELIMINARY VOTING QUESTIONNAIRE		
YOUR NAME:	LOCATION:	TIME:
1. Interviewee's name:		
2. Age:		
3. Major:		
4. Hometown:		
5. Are you registered to vote?		
5a. If yes, which county/state:		
5a1. If Payne Co., awareness of Nov. 10 election on transportation tax?		
5b. If yes, are you registered with one party, and which one?		
5c. If no, why haven't you registered?		
6. On a scale of 1 to 10 -- with 1 being "not at all" and 10 being "a lot" -- how much attention have you paid to the presidential campaigns?		
6a. If answer is 3 and below : why haven't been following the campaigns closely?		
6b. If 4 and above : Where do you get your information about the presidential campaigns? (If needed, offer these prompts: television, the web, social media, friends?)		
7. Which candidate you are currently supporting?		
7a. If named : What separates that candidate from the others?		

This is how the project worked:

1. The students read poll stories and poll questions to develop their own questions in the overall lecture class. We created a 17-question form for each interview (a portion, left).

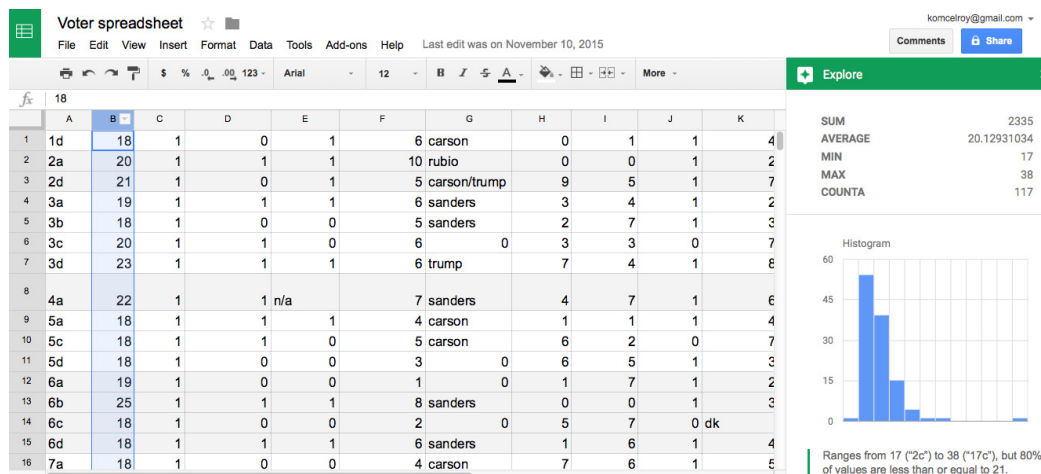
2. The students had about a week to record four interviews with strangers,

whom they identified and photographed. The interviews had to take place at four different sites and include two (self-identified) female and two male students. One had to be a person of color or a person with a visible disability. This informal survey was not based on random sampling but was designed to get students out of their comfort zone. The students turned in their questionnaires (hand-written or typed) by a set deadline, and also identified their best audio interview and the best quotes from their interviews. (Only one student failed to turn in his work on time; he didn't complete the course).

3. We had 29 x 4 interviews, 116 questionnaires. We used lab time to enter the data into a worksheet that coded answers. Students listened to the interviews (posted on the class online discussion site) for clarification and verification. No one entered his or her own data, but students could answer questions about their interviews.

At this stage, the data could be entered directly in an Excel or Google spreadsheet, but these students used paper worksheets. I entered the information from the worksheets into a Google spreadsheet (for some quality control).

A snapshot of the Google spreadsheet



4. The Google spreadsheet made the data come alive for the class; we played with variables to come up with compelling information. The students then compared their results to those of recent polls produced or run by news media organizations. Based on our previous discussions on news values and current events, they decided what was the newsiest information, what was the context for their findings, how their findings compared to other polls and which answers were most compelling.

5. In another lab session, the students were divided into groups of two to write each paragraph of a news story. Based on class discussions, two students crafted a lead. Another two students wrote the lengthy methodology paragraph. Other sets of students wrote a paragraph based on each the important findings. They used the best quotes from the overall set of best quotes as examples for their findings. Every student in lab contributed a paragraph because I discreetly assigned tasks based on their skillsets.

The students posted their paragraphs on class discussion board. We decided as a group the rough order of the paragraphs and did some editing. I cleaned it up a bit for professional publication.

The published article

A2 Stillwater News Press **State/Local** Tuesday, December 1, 2015

AROUND OKLAHOMA

Cordell man found dead in his home

CORDELL — The Oklahoma State Bureau of Investigation says a Cordell man has been found dead inside his home and a woman and the man's missing vehicle are being sought.

The OSBI says Cordell police asked for its assistance after 59-year-old Michael Beach's body was found Monday morning by officers conducting a welfare check on the man. The OSBI says a friend of the dead man requested the welfare check after not hearing from Beach for several days.

The agency says investigators are searching for Beach's missing 2002, white Chevrolet Tahoe and for 44-year-old

Kathleen Lynn Hicks

Survey: OSU students in line with national polls

Special to the News Press

Data collected in a recent informal survey revealed Oklahoma State students are just as concerned about the economy as those questioned in a recent national poll. In an informal survey of 116 students in Stillwater, 37 percent named the economy as a major issue facing America, compared to 33 percent in an October Gallup poll.

The informal survey was conducted last week by an Oklahoma State reporting class in the School of Media & Strategic Communications. The journalism students wanted to learn how politically aware and active their peers were on the Stillwater campus. They created a variety of questions pertaining to voting and the upcoming presidential election for this informal survey. The questions included:

Republican	48%
Democrat	37
Other	18

Of the four interviewed, two had to be female, two had to be male and one of those had to be a person of color. The people interviewed provided their names, ages, hometowns and majors as well as allowing the journalism students to record the interviews and take photos. After completing the interviews, the student journalists compiled the information and examined the data.

Of the 116 people interviewed, 73 were from Oklahoma (63 percent), 22 from Texas (19 percent) and 21 from other states or out of the country. The ages ranged from 17-38, with 18 being the largest age group (29) and 20 being the median age.

According to

was the second most important issue. The issue of debt on OSU's campus was much higher than the 5 percent found on the poll at gallup.com.

The third most important issue with 22 percent of students voting was foreign policy. The topic was also higher for OSU students than the general poll having foreign policy at 3 percent.

Almost two-thirds of the interviewed students said they are registered to vote, a higher percentage than the national percentage for the last presidential election. In 2012, 58 percent of eligible Americans 18 to 29 were registered. Among Oklahomans, 70 percent were registered to vote, a much higher

that they saw no point in registering because they thought politics were unfair, they did not follow politics closely, or they had little interest in politics. A few students also said they did not know how to register or where to go to register.

Sixty of the 116 students surveyed did not have a candidate preference. Of those with a preference, 19 students preferred Ben Carson and 17 preferred Bernie Sanders. Other candidates who were mentioned included Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump; however, Govs. Jeb Bush and Chris Christie were not mentioned.

The students were also asked their opinion on Trump and Clinton on a scale from 1-10, with one being least confident and 10 being most confident. Of the students that answered six or higher, 23 chose

dislike in a candidate, "obvious lack of intellect, or sense of the actual happenings of the world."

Students said they were attracted to candidates with such characteristics as honesty, intelligence and leadership. Sajjan Patel, 18, a mechanical and aerospace engineering major from Tulsa, said that he favors candidates who stick to their words and follow promises.

The data received from the interviewed students showed 45 percent affiliated with the Republican Party, 37 percent affiliated with the Democrat Party and 18 percent said Independent, Libertarian and other. According to a 2015 Pew Research Center report, 32 percent of Americans consider themselves Democrat and 23 percent consider themselves Republicans. Pew also found 51 percent of so-called

The News Press didn't run audio and photos, but they were available for online use.

This project can be modified for any number of students and lab sizes. The subject doesn't have to be politics, but that topic lends itself to students' reading political stories and following examples.

Students improved their interviewing and reporting skills, absorbed political reporting and polling, got to work with numbers, and wrote and edited. I think they also had fun doing it.

(Visuals of the entire process are available.)