



My First Time Teaching a Multimedia Journalism Course

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One of the first times I knew I really was in trouble as a new journalism professor was in August 2003 at the Association for Education and Journalism and Mass Communications conference in Kansas City, Mo. I had been feeling a bit cocky after surviving my first year on the tenure track after a 20-year tenure as a newspaper reporter and editor at places ranging from the *Spruce Grove Star*, near Edmonton, Alberta, to the *Los Angeles Times*. At the AEJMC conference, I was intrigued by the array of panels on multimedia, and I attended many.

The one I recall most was by a panel of speakers from the Annenberg School at the University of Southern California. They reported on their first year of offering a converged journalism curriculum, and I distinctly remember them saying words to the effect of: "Be careful if you're still on the tenure track. Your student evaluations are going to suffer." In a paper later published in the *Journalism & Mass Communication Educator*, three USC researchers wrote about surveys of students enrolled in those first converged classes. The students graded the converged curriculum as of "C" quality. When asked whether they would recommend the converged program as it then existed, those students ranked the program overall as "Poor," with "Extremely Poor" their most frequent response (Castaneda, Murphy, & Hether, 2005, pp. 65-66).

Gulp. And that was USC and they have oodles of money, time, and well-trained staff. What was little old I going to do? I buried my head in grading, committee work, and my own writing for another two years. There was no pressure from the English De-

partment in which I teach to get on the digital bandwagon. My sole journalism colleague was pursuing other interests and not digitally concerned. I taught myself how to use Microsoft Publisher. I learned how to use Blackboard. I tried to ignore most things digital. But I couldn't. Many of my friends at the *Los Angeles Times* and other newspapers were being laid off as the papers tried to adjust to the Internet revolution. One of my co-workers who survived at the *Times* morphed into a graveyard shift web editor. The newspaper business that I had left three years previously was changing rapidly.

I invited the managing editor of one of the local Pennsylvania papers to speak to my feature writing class.

"What are you doing to prepare students to work online?" she asked.

"Nothing," some of my students blurted.

I had to do something.

During Summer 2005, I attended a two-week "multimodal" English composition workshop at Michigan Technological University, taught by Cynthia Selfe, a leading technological guru in composition studies. Selfe and her colleagues introduced me to digital audio recording, digital video shooting and editing, and HTML, among other things, and oh, it was painful.

"When you came in, I thought, 'Oh, that poor woman,'" Selfe later told me. Talk about an ego-deflating experience. There was no easy way I could transfer much of what I had learned at the workshop into the classes I was teaching in the fall. So, I didn't.

But gradually, I enrolled in more workshops and online classes. The current count is 40. I bought my own equipment and attended the Summer 2008 multimedia workshop for journalism professors at the University of South Carolina's Newsplex. I started experimenting with class blogs and requiring my writing students to take photos. I moved my editing class's newsletter from Microsoft Publisher to InDesign (and now it's on Issuu). During the summer of 2009, I did an "internship" at the *Observer-Reporter* newspaper in Washington, Pa., where I worked a little bit on the website but mostly shot and edited 15 videos. I gained a little confidence.

Meanwhile, I had drafted the protocol syllabus for a new "Multimedia Journalism" class. I pushed it through my department and the university's Curriculum Committee. I persuaded the university administrators to upgrade our computer lab with spiffy Macs, new software, cameras, and audio recorders. I had all the fixings for a multimedia party. Now it was up to me to deliver the guests, uh, students, and make sure they had a good time, err, learned something. I taught my first multimedia journalism class in Fall 2010.

Was teaching multimedia journalism stressful? You bet.

We created a class blog and individual blogs, shot photos, and created Powerpoints, Soundslides projects with audio, and videos. From one day to the next, I was working at the edge of my knowledge, trying to stay one step ahead of the students. Our lab's new projection system wasn't ready until a month after class started. I had to improvise with a laptop and portable projector or an old-fashioned overhead projector until then. After the projector was installed, it needed constant adjustments. I'd call the Help Desk during class and my students would just roll their eyes and snicker.

But the projector was just one of my problems. Two students "forgot" to return their somewhat pricey cameras after dropping the class. One finally agreed to hand over the camera, and we met, late one night in a parking lot, à la Deep Throat. The other sneaked the camera into our department just hours before I was planning to file a police report and a few days after the dean of students contacted her.

How were my student evaluations? Mixed. They ranged from "Perhaps have a professor who know [sic] what they [sic] are doing teach the class next time it is offered" to "The class was fun and gave new experiences to students." I guess if I had asked the students to grade the course, the grades might have

averaged out to a "C."

Since last fall, I've had a chance to look at some of the literature about the stress of teaching with technology. If nothing else, this reading has been therapeutic, reassuring me I'm not alone in my anxiety about teaching with technology and, especially, about teaching multimedia journalism.

Several articles about journalism professors' stress over technology were published in the *Journalism Educator* in 2003. One article discussed a telephone survey of AEJMC faculty to determine the extent to which technology plays a role in the instructors' feelings of exhaustion. The conclusion was that "technology-related stressors... mattered more than course load, tenure status, rank or gender" in contributing to exhaustion (Beam, Kim, & Voakes, p. 347). The study called for more technical support and for more technology training of faculty. Another article described how women, in general, are more stressed out. It discussed a UCLA study in which young women who were using computers as much as their male colleagues were half as confident about their computer skills (Ogan & Chung, pp. 355-356). Women just don't have as much confidence about their digital prowess. Still another study found that older, female professors with heavy teaching loads, whose classes were predominantly skills classes, were among the most stressed (Voakes, Beam, & Ogan, pp. 329-330). Hmmm, a perfect description of me.

Other articles discussed the feeling among faculty who teach with technology that they are "perpetual novices," which means that in order to keep a stiff upper lip, they need to have "strong self-efficacy" (Ertmer & Ottenbreit-Leftwich, 2010, p. 261). Leggget and Persichitte described 50 years of obstacles in implementing technology as "blood, sweat, and TEARS," in which "TEARS" stands for "lack of time," "expertise," "access," "resources," and "support" (as cited in Mandefrot, 2001, Claims and Counterclaims section, para. 9). Commenting on their study of a community college, a school noted for its integration of technology into the curriculum and its emphasis on learner-centered instruction, Owen and Demb (2004) discussed how using technology "changes the fundamental teaching paradigm from teacher-centered to learner-centered instruction" (p. 636) and how the "transformational change associated with technology is even more disruptive for faculty than change without technology" (p. 658). They added that "Coupled with the unsettling nature of transfor-

mational change, which challenges assumptions, roles, values, and norms, [technology] participants experience a disturbing lack of control and the result is a situation full of both personal and institutional tensions” (p. 658). Owen and Demb, like many other writers, also mentioned how faculty become frustrated with the amount of time needed to prepare to teach with technology (pp. 662-663).

And yet, professors haven’t thrown in the towel on teaching with technology. That includes me. Last spring, while teaching feature writing, I had the students make a class blog and an individual blog. In the fall, in a reporting class, we’re going to try mobile journalism, using laptops and phones, to write stories that may be “livestreamed” to a class blog. I’m still exploring this. Wish me luck.

I never feel any better than a novice with each further step I take into the digital world. Everything is always new. In Lev Vygotsky’s terms, I’m continually operating in the “zone of proximal development” (University of North Carolina School of Education, n.d., “Zone of Proximal Development”). And it’s uncomfortable, scary, and lonely out here in the zone.

My university gives lots of awards, and in 2010, a woman from my department won the university’s technology award after getting certified in “digital storytelling” and incorporating digital storytelling into one of her composition classes. That was the spur I needed to apply for the award this past year. Somehow, I won. At the awards luncheon, each winner was to speak briefly. When it was my turn, my voice trembled and then the tears started to flow. The tears caught me by surprise. As are many of my experiences with technology, it was embarrassing. I blubbered on about how, even after winning the award, I still feel like a digital idiot. And I do. I thanked at least some of the people who’ve helped me along the way. And

there have been many. Our IT department and administration have been supportive. I’m still not totally sure why I cried.

As a journalist, I’ve covered traffic accidents and suicides, fires, and political brawls. My house has been pelted with eggs by people angry about the stories I’ve written. My stories have led to people getting fired for unethical conduct. Journalists are tough. Journalists don’t cry. But I did. If you can do technology plus journalism, then you are one tough cookie. I crumbled.

Yet, despite the blood, sweat, and TEARS, I do believe journalism professors must infuse their teaching with technology. I’m committed to improving my technology skills enough so I can focus more on the content in my classes and less on the machinery.

I continue to be one of just a handful of professors in my department who are seriously wrestling with technology. For my journalism students, if it’s going to be, it’s up to me. And yet, as my student pointed out in his or her evaluation, it would be helpful to the students if they had a professor who knew what she is doing. I know the journalism. It’s the technology that is so much more elusive. Still, I soldier on. It’s my job. But it’s more than that. Making a video that’s true to journalism and interesting to watch can be fun and rewarding. Designing a blog or website that’s user-friendly, visually attractive, and journalistically attuned can be a kick.

When I won the university’s technology award, I also won a cool, new Ipad. I pray to the gods and goddesses of journalism and technology that it doesn’t take me months to learn how to use it.

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