



Control Room Challenge

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Show producers are critical to the production of live news shows, where they manage the program’s structure and juggle show elements, stories, and the fluid flow of information (Bantz *et al.*, 1980). News producing classes need to prepare students for the challenges of a live news show production. The Control Room Challenge immerses students in the dynamics of a live news environment, providing hands-on experience in roles such as producers, anchors, and crew members. This lab assignment not only equips students with the technical skills required for newsroom roles such as producers, anchors, and crew members, but also cultivates critical thinking, adaptability, and collaboration.

The Control Room Challenge creates a dynamic, realistic control room with key course materials: newsroom software like ENPS or iNews for developing rundowns and boothing the show (managing the timing and flow of a show inside a control room), video playback systems such as QuickTime or Adobe Premiere for launching video content, and communication platforms like Slack for coordination among producing teams. These course materials enable students to experience the various dynamics of a broadcast news control room within a classroom, from writing and editing stories to managing live broadcasts.

At Arizona State, undergraduate and graduate students enrolled in the news producing class, which is a prerequisite course for student producers of Cronkite News, a daily news show on Arizona PBS. Before the lab assignment, students produced rundowns, wrote news stories, analyzed local news programs, and evaluated on-air content for newsworthiness. This Control Room Challenge allows students to synthesize what they learned in past assignments and apply those lessons to a simulated news show.

In this lab assignment, every producing team

works with the same rundown stacked with stories and videos by the instructor. This lab assignment works best with a 10-minute A Block for a news show. Before the lab assignment, the instructor designs different scenarios for the producing teams. The scenarios are drawn from the instructor’s experience working as a news producer at commercial and public media stations. The scenarios included live, breaking news elements, and technical challenges. For example – during a 90-second video package – the producing teams learn that the next story lost sound. The producers and their teams have less than 90 seconds to figure out what to do next. Another example is another producing team waiting for a live news conference on the bridge collapse in Baltimore. The producer and team need to decide how to fill that time before they can take live pictures of the news conference.

After teams had assigned roles and agreed on a communication strategy, the class started the live news show inside the classroom. The instructor plays the roles of show director, technical director, and assignment desk editor. The instructor plays video clips when they worked and informs producers about up-

coming news conferences and the status of live shots. The instructor also prompts producers to consider how they want to take live events and how that affects the timing of their 10-minute rundown. After each producing group booths a simulated news show, the lab assignment calls on students to write a 100-word reflection on their experience.

One student wrote:

Even though this assignment was an exercise it still felt pretty real ... The communication between tech and producers was a little rough and it was hard to put things into the rundown that fast. But overall the activity was a good example of how hectic and disorderly a control room can be and what to do in situations like this.

Another student wrote:

I served as the producer for this news show and it was a ton of fun but also pretty stressful ... I’ve always had respect for the producers and the work they do as someone who works on the talent side of things, but getting the opportunity to produce news was a ton of fun and also increased my respect tenfold.

In addition to giving students hands-on news-producing experience, this assignment utilizes a role-playing approach that contributes to a change of perspective for students when they gain context from relevant scenarios in the classroom and have a chance to learn about working in the control room environment from their experiences (Westrup & Planander, 2013). The Control Room Challenge aligns with different levels of the revised Bloom’s taxonomy, which include creating, analyzing, applying, and understanding (Anderson *et al.*, 2001). Students apply their knowledge of developing and utilizing news show rundowns in a lab assignment that replicates real-world control room conditions in a classroom setting. As the news show continues in real-time, students consider what they learned in past lab work to scenarios that require problem-solving and decision-making under a news show deadline. This lab assignment addresses key learning objectives for a news producing class: develop and utilize news show rundowns, organize stories and other content for a news show, define strategies for maintaining synergy with the production crew, and develop a flexible mindset for editorial and technological changes.

Drawing from my journalism school experience and insights from former students, I recognized the necessity for a class that simulates live news produc-

tion roles without monopolizing resources from an active television studio. When I started as a news producer, journalism professors and news directors described the line-producing experience as a “trial by fire” experience – where new journalists swam or sank under the expectations and pressures of a live news show. This approach to line producing could be stressful for new journalists, causing emotional damage because of real-world consequences of news shows that fail to execute without mistakes.

This Control Room Challenge provides a safe space for students to tackle the technical and editorial challenges of news producing. They gain experience working in a control room without the pressure of being watched by newsroom workers. Student reflections showed they gained insight into a live news show operation, an understanding of time management and technical challenges in a control room, and an appreciation for the complexity of news production and the roles of news producers.

References

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Keywords: Broadcast News, News Producing, Control Room, Live News Shows, Rundowns, Role Playing