



REFORMING J101: What I Learned From the Rush to Publish

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My first steps—and missteps—as a reporter were on my mind the first year I taught a beginning reporting class. I wrote checklists aimed at closing the fact-finding gaps. I talked about the painful day my city editor made me spell out, in detail, how I produced an inaccurate news story. I recalled how my newspaper appeased an angry source by running a correction on Page 1. I preached the fundamentals: Choose a worthy topic, let sources know you're a reporter, be accurate, write with clarity, follow Associated Press style, revise and proofread.

Then, my department adopted a content-management system that could thrust students' first stories into the public domain. I rewrote the syllabus around this new tool. Eager to embrace social media, I later urged students to promote stories on Facebook and Twitter.

As sort of a final exam, students produced enterprised stories. The pieces read well enough, after they were revised for AP style and grammar. I encouraged the writers to plug the most obvious holes. But after everything was put online, the fallout was enough to make me tear up my syllabus, again.

A student lost his job when he wrote about something related to his workplace. He tweeted it, then learned that his bosses deemed the story bad PR. Another student got someone else to research and write an assignment. He earned an F, but I wasted several days in conducting the investigation.

My spot check of sources revealed other troubling matters. A campus source was promised anonymity

but was quoted anyway. I asked the students to take their own pictures, but one student's published story included photographs from other web pages, minus photo credit. Even some of the best stories had a few facts amiss.

To be fair, most of the pieces were fine. But I believe the pressure to publish led some students to cut corners. Or, I just hadn't devoted enough time to teaching ethics and personal accountability. Fact-checking became just a suggestion when time wasn't dedicated to it either in class or at home.

I'll admit that these young devotees to Facebook, YouTube and, in those days, Myspace, had published their comings and goings since high school, crafting all matter of videos, photographs, news briefs and off-the-cuff opinion pieces.

What went wrong? I had brought what amounted to everyone's favorite hobby into the classroom, turned it into an assignment, and then held it up to journalistic standards. I made some people happy, embarrassed others, and found myself working nights as their copy editor. There are courses for which this level of instructor attention is justified. But the intro course? It was time for another change.

A strong focus on production implied that everything would go on the web.

I expected students to test their skills on a site that bore our school's name, and thus our program's reputation. Even if all students uploaded stories to the system, I didn't have to hit the "publish" key for everyone. However, would I have time, in the last days

of the semester, to show students why their work remained hidden?

Some students have high school journalism backgrounds, but many do not. Some have an appetite for mainstream media news, while others take their facts laced with commentary.

Many have no desire to be journalists. My class was a prerequisite for PR students and an elective for English majors. It fulfilled a writing-intensive course requirement for several majors, from sports management to education. Most of them had never written for more than a few hundred Facebook friends.

When I was a student, journalism professors who thought a story had merit simply pointed us toward the campus paper. This meant hand-carrying the piece to an office filled with intimidating student journalists. If we sophomores were lucky, a senior named Roxie or Lisa would coolly scan the story, lower her eyelids, and say, “I think I can use this. Thanks.”

It might be buried on Page 6 or run with a tagline on Page 1, but we had been judged by our peers and we were published.

I was pleased with my students for pulling together their stories and photographs, for revising them, for inserting hyperlinks and bylines, and for promoting their work on Facebook. Parents and grandparents were proud. I was happy they found value in the process of using a CMS. But when we lost the website for other reasons, I felt more relief than regret.

The experience had its rewards. I learned that intro students take decent pictures, so I kept giving photography assignments that emphasized composition and getting proper identification. This gave students confidence, especially when their work was praised in class or posted to the course website.

The field trip – where we prowl the campus, looking for a news photo – was something I’ll repeat.

Finally, I was left with plenty of ideas for a second revision of the syllabus. In teaching writing as a process, not a product, I moved the enterprise assignment up a few weeks.

Throughout the semester I devoted more time to these basics:

Choose a worthy subject: Setting aside a day to talk about story topics as a class helps students address the fear factor. They can test their ideas against the ideal of a newsworthy piece. They give one another such great suggestions, too. Open dialogue also allows me to weed out the forbidden interview with mom (or boss or roommate) and to ask if ethical practices have

been followed. We can explore what it means to have a conflict of interest.

Let sources know you’re a reporter: If there’s even a remote chance a newspaper story will wind up on the web, this must be stated before an interview begins. I have heard from sources who thought the published piece was “just a class assignment,” or who believed it would circulate on campus and nowhere else. While this narrows the list of people who will go on the record, it takes the story out of the safety zone as an assignment that no one sees but me.

Be accurate: Sending a complete version of a story to a source for fact-checking can be a bad idea for many reasons. Students should devise another way to verify key points, ideally at the end of an interview. For a long-form story, they should plan to follow up with a quick phone call or an e-mail. Recorded conversations don’t ensure accuracy if a student misunderstands or paraphrases incorrectly. I use dictation drills to show students how well they listen. Early in the term we take notes during an audio news conference – something I pluck from the web – to simulate real-time deadline pressure. And, I’ve doubled my efforts to teach about libel.

Write with clarity: Editing skills can begin in J101. For a long story, a content-feedback day gives everyone a chance to collect comments from multiple classmates. They write anonymous notes that I collect and attach to unmarked stories. I coach students to give constructive feedback on anything they don’t understand. Finding something praiseworthy in each story is as important as finding an area for improvement. Students have remarked on what they learned from classmate comments.

Follow AP style: Ideally, a student comes to J101 with some exposure to news style. A separate style course, taken as a prerequisite, frees the instructor to focus on reporting and writing skills. We’re heading in that direction.

Revise: How do we get students to recognize mistakes and fix them, without doing too much of the heavy lifting ourselves? On the last assignment, after some coaching, I turn classmates into peer editors. My feedback is especially important after a peer editor looks at a story. The student editor must turn in a copy of the edited piece, marking changes. Not only does this prevent editing error, but it gives me a way to grade their feedback.

Proofread: Training students to look for a stray comma or misplaced letter should begin in J101, and

it's worth working into the schedule. A printout can reveal hidden errors. Another method is to read from the bottom up, sentence by sentence.

Find an editor: Today's campus newspaper editors have names like Brittany and Kayla, and the long trip to the newsroom has been replaced by an e-mail query. But editors still perform the important function of giving students a byline. Editors can convey encouragement and appreciation in ways I cannot. And the new media dimension is still there if the story appears in the paper's online edition.

For my intro students, submitting a story to me is just that—turning it in for a grade, with no promise of publication. I give bonus points to those who pitch stories to campus editors. We've had a nice run of published work and we helped editors recruit new talent. Some students may decline to seek publication.

In such cases, I ask them to send the story to their major source and report what they learned from the feedback. It's published, just not through mass media, and shows them how well they told the story.

I won't rule out teaching with a content-management system, but not in this class. If we use Twitter and Facebook, it will be for writing news briefs. And I'll remind myself of the thrill I felt in J101 when I earned my first newspaper byline.

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