



SYMPOSIUM INTRO: Reforming the Journalism Curriculum: Explosives or Scalpel?

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Journalism education has been a target of criticism for most of its existence. Working journalists insist it's too abstract and that the best education is on-the-job training. Academics fear it is too practical and smacks of trade school. But in recent years, we journalism professors may have been the ones scrutinizing journalism the most, as new technology, shrinking opportunities in traditional news media, and the redefinition of the profession have forced changes in what and how we teach. Calls to blow up the journalism curriculum are fast becoming a cliché; yet they convey the urgency many journalism educators feel as they face students who must gain new skills, often skills their middle-aged professors don't possess, while also learning the fundamentals. The list of requirements is longer, but the semester isn't. Further, the labyrinth that programs must navigate to make changes to the curriculum or find the resources for new technology can kill off the most modest plans before they are conceived.

None of this is news to journalism and mass communication professors. Nevertheless, we decided to inaugurate this first issue of the journal with a symposium intended to address a small piece of this massive challenge. Rather than grasp at the whole curriculum, we're taking baby steps and looking at that first journalism course—Journalism 101 as it is vernacularly called—to see if in-depth exploration of what such a course should do might help tease out some practical approaches to reform.

Journalism programs come in several different configurations, depending on whether they're in Journalism, English, or Communication departments; they're also configured differently in numbers of courses and requirements based on the type and size of the host college or university. One thing every program has, however, is J101 (even if it's called something else). This course might be offered as a boot camp for majors only, where students get exhausted from drills in AP style and lead writing, or it might be a course where mostly nonmajors come to fulfill a general education requirement. Still another scenario is the media writing course, in which majors get an overview of journalism across media and allied fields, such as public relations or advertising. There's no one design that fits all.

The fact that J101 courses are configured differently is interesting in itself, as it shows how schools differ in what they have deemed important for students to learn first.

That's also why we put out a call to blow up Journalism 101; we hoped that some SPIG members would experiment in spring 2011 and report back to us. We thought some people might turn the entire course upside down or perhaps throw in or discard a unit.

Our experiment attracted only a few participants for its debut, but we're hoping others will see questions and ideas here that will make them comment or write an essay about something they tried.

Gradual Changes

Setting off to reform the journalism curriculum in general, and the J101 curriculum in particular, can feel a little heretical. We journalism educators have not gone in much for large-scale change. In his essay for this symposium, Michael A. Longinow of Biola University, provides an overview of the efforts to overhaul journalism curricula nationally and notes the caution with which programs have proceeded. Issues ranging from resistance by faculty to concerns about not straying too far from dictates outlined by the Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (ACEJMC) contribute to the tendency to use scalpels rather than explosives. Even with spiffy new equipment and courses now bearing “Multi-media” or “New Media” in their title, the journalism professoriate’s approach to teaching has not changed that much. While the Carnegie-Knight Initiative on the Future of Journalism Education’s News21 has pushed curriculum in some large, elite programs toward more topic-focused training (rather than medium- or skills-focused training), the core and rationale of the journalism curriculum chugs along largely unchanged. Although journalism programs differ in size and scope, they subscribe to some common approaches that, judging from Miranda’s (2001) examination of journalism textbooks from the late 1800s, have been in place nearly as long as journalism education. Journalism education has positioned itself as a place to develop writing and editing skills, and report news with impartiality. (Miranda writes that although the word, “objectivity,” is never used, “Not a single author used terms and descriptions that are not generally associated with the practice of objective reporting” [p. 30].)

Critics of journalism education have offered theories about the shape of the curriculum. Reese and Cohen (2000) are among those who argue that journalism’s history, traditions, and alignment with the industry have resulted in a narrow curriculum of skills training that has not forged relationships with academic disciplines in the academy. Although I am in sympathy with this view, I’m less sure what, if anything, could be dropped from the current curriculum to make way for something new. During spring 2011, when I prepared to teach a special section of my program’s versions of J101, titled JRN200 Introduction to Journalism, for a class of mainly freshmen journalism majors, I was willing to do some damage to the syllabus, so to speak. We run five-to-six sections

of Introduction to Journalism a semester, mostly for nonmajors. I assigned myself to teach the special section for freshmen majors, seeing it as a chance to “get them started on the right foot.”

What I think I meant at the time was that I wanted this group of students to embrace the old and new and be inspired enough to get busy being part of what journalism is becoming. Of course, one can say that only a couple of times. The mix of lectures, discussions, and assignments has to motivate students in that direction. I went through each unit, from the first-week discussion of “What is News?” to the cover-a-speech assignment, through Watergate week, and all the way to the last week of rewrites on a final news or feature story. But I was finding it difficult to part with any of the units, including the requisite *New York Times* (in hard copy). This isn’t because I am wedded to legacy media. I designed and taught our first web journalism course in 2001 and am comfortable using blogs, mashups, timelines, Soundslides and other tools for a range of assignments. Since 2008, I’ve used Twitter as a way to help students in the first course practice leads.

As I revised my syllabus, I was more like a person whose suitcase is so full she needs to sit on it to close it rather than someone who has suddenly found one more spot inside the suitcase where she might squeeze an item or two. When I started thinking about what I wanted a journalism major to take away from her first course, I couldn’t part with anything. Not even the old, “Even if your mother says she loves you, check it out” many of us heard from journalism professors 25 and 30 years ago, which still gets laughs.

A comment by Pat Miller, of Valdosta State University, one of several people who weighed in during the ongoing wiki conversations on this project, helped me to make the 90-degree shift—small but fundamental—that helped me design some changes in my approach that I hope to build on in spring 2012 when I teach that course again. Miller wrote, “What we really have is a rhetorical problem, which is the approach I take with my students. We have to understand the rhetoric of the new media and the basic ways it’s changed the relationship to the audience.” She certainly got our attention and came back to elaborate a little later.

...Students need to understand a three-pronged rhetoric of language, sound and image. They also need to understand how the tools (especially social media) change (1) what

the audience sees as news and (2) how they go about reporting, itself.

It was a place to start. Getting a handle on the rhetoric of text, sound, and image and how all components must be utilized for news reports opened up the syllabus for me. Our new major, which was built on a print-centric curriculum, has added broadcast and multimedia, but the basic reporting classes are still too print-centric. I brought in sound and image assignments, albeit small ones, to get students thinking about the interplay of text, sound, and image upfront. Introduction to Journalism was not the class in which to pull out our Nikons and Olympuses, which would have required some training on the camera. Instead, I took advantage of the fact that all students had a phone with a camera (and one or two fairly expensive SLRs they were eager to use). All the students snapped news photos, wrote captions, and proudly shared their work. We were not able to spend a lot of time comparing the broadcast and print story on the same topic—I had to get to All the President’s Men/Watergate week—but Miller’s three-pronged approach was a way to frame my remodeling.

Curriculum reform, I’ve come to accept, is a gradual process; and yet I am finding that even small initiatives can teach a lot. Carrie M. Buchanan, of John Carroll University, reports on how she explored the creation of an online presence with her students. Since many of her first-time journalism students were not majoring in journalism and would not take another course, Buchanan had questions about how much of that online presence should be required for her students. From her essay, it appears that even if students weren’t immediately sold on the idea, they were introduced to bloggers of various professional statuses. My guess is that even the students reluctant to build a presence will draw on what they learned one day.

Mary Alice Basconi, of East Tennessee State University, also provides useful insights about expectations for new journalism students. Basconi has had a lot of experience putting students’ work online, but what she calls a “rush to publish” has consequences. For 2011, she eased up on some of that push, delaying certain assignments and doing more upfront work on writing and reporting basics, as well as ethics. Like Buchanan, Basconi makes those with a more aggressive approach think about some of the consequences when students hang their work up for the world to see.

So, what does professionalism mean in the con-

text of the first journalism course? This question engendered others, which will be discussed in this first issue:

- When is student work good enough for professors to put up for public view?
- Is interviewing parents or close friends ever justifiable?
- Should we relax ethical standards just because students are taking their first course in journalism?

These are just a few of the questions raised by this opening phase of our symposium. We’re looking for SPIG members and other readers of the journal to raise more. Are there units we all typically do that we could throw out tomorrow to make room for something else? Has anyone whittled down Watergate week now that we know who Deep Throat was? And is it just me or are many of the textbooks pushed at us too uninspiring for these times? These are just a few of the questions in play every time we sit down to prepare syllabi for a new semester. Join us to explore them here.

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References

- Mirando, J.A. (2001). Embracing objectivity early on: Journalism textbooks of the 1800s. *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*, 16(1), 23-32.
- Reese, S.D. & Cohen, J. (2000). Education for journalism: The professionalism of scholarship. *Journalism Studies*, 1(2), 213-227.

Please also see these related supporting essays:

- Reforming J101: Fire in the Hole: Curricular Explosion, Fearless Journalism Pedagogy, and Media Convergence by Michael A. Longinow
- Reforming J101: Establishing an Online Presence by Carrie M. Buchanan
- Reforming J101: What I Learned From the Rush to Publish by Mary Alice Basconi