



Team-Teaching Online Journalism by Focusing on the Great Migration

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In the Spring of 2011, we teamed up to teach an Online Journalism course that engaged 19 students in conducting in-depth interviews with six African American residents of Philadelphia's Germantown neighborhood. The residents were among the six million African Americans who had migrated from the South to the North as part of the Great Migration in the first half of the 20th century. The 19 students in the class were divided into six teams and each team spent approximately 10 hours interviewing one of the six Germantown residents. The interviews, which required students to cross race, class, and age boundaries, were recorded on video and audio. Each student in the class then produced his or her own blog about Germantown and the Great Migration based on the story of the person with whom the student's team had been matched. In the fall of 2011, one student in the class worked in an independent study under us and pulled together the video from each of the six teams into a 30-minute documentary called *Journeys of Promise: Germantown and the Great Migration*. Here, we present the result of our students' work and discuss the lessons learned.

Background

Across the country, journalism educators are wrestling with how best to incorporate Web-based skills into the traditional journalism curriculum. Certainly, a watershed was reached by the mid-2000s when the balance began to tip more rapidly from print to online news production (Beatty, 2008).

That shift has prompted an intense debate about the future of journalism. On the one hand, Shirky (2008) and others believe the rise of the Internet has advanced the quality of journalism by opening it up to citizens, what he calls "mass amateurization" (p. 61). Robinson (2011) also argues there is an emerging news environment that views journalism as a social process involving professional, social, and civic groups. On the other hand, others argue that no matter what the technology, quality journalism still rests on accurate, complete, and fair reporting by professional journalists who are trained to do first-hand observations, verify facts, put stories in context, and write in a compelling way. These critics argue that the rise of citizen journalism and blogs has produced "incremental news" about relatively trivial topics when what the public really needs is in-depth reporting about issues that matter (Starkman, 2011, p. 130).

Whatever the outcome of the debate, it's clear that rapid technological change, particularly in the newspaper industry, means that journalism students need to be trained to work across multiple media platforms (Meyer, 2004). No longer are reporting and writing the only skills that students need to master; they also have to learn how to blog, shoot video, and make use of social media, such as Facebook and Twitter. However, the question is how to expand the journalism curriculum to include these 21st-century skills without shortchanging the bedrock skills of reporting and writing, which are fundamental to the future of journalism and to the future of American democracy.

(Mencher, 2006).

Important experiments are now underway at leading journalism schools to meld new technology with substantive reporting on issues that matter. Most notable is News21 (2011), the Carnegie-Knight Initiative based at the Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication at Arizona State University, in which 16 accredited journalism schools were participating by 2012. But at small colleges and universities, where journalism is typically taught in a handful of courses housed in English or communication departments, there simply are not enough resources or expertise to develop a converged journalism curriculum without significantly reducing instructional time devoted to “the iron core”—teaching students how to tell compelling stories about important social issues based on accurate, fair, and complete reporting (Jones, 2009).

Such is the case at La Salle University in Philadelphia where we teach. Founded by the Christian Brothers, La Salle is a Catholic liberal arts school with about 3,200 full-time undergraduates. It traces its roots to St. John Baptiste de la Salle, who opened free schools for poor children in 17th-century France and taught them in the vernacular rather than in Latin. In keeping with the mission of its patron saint, La Salle pays special attention to undergraduate teaching and to education “for the common good.” Although La Salle has produced some notable journalists (Tom Curley, president and CEO of the Associated Press from 2003 to 2012, went to La Salle), it has a tiny journalism program housed in a much larger communication department. Only about 40 of the department’s 330 majors concentrate in journalism; most of the university’s communication majors are in the public-relations track. In addition, La Salle’s English department offers a number of courses in digital publishing and Web design, which both journalism students and those in public relations often take as electives to develop their multimedia skills.

The Great Migration project

In the spring of 2011, we combined our very divergent talents to team-teach an online journalism course that applied digital technology to tell one of the great uncovered stories of the 20th century—the migration of African Americans from the South to the North. We chose this topic for a variety of reasons. The Great Migration was, as Gene Roberts, former editor of *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, used to say, an “ooze story”—

one that happened in spurts and starts over so many decades that few in the mainstream media took note. It was an important story, one that changed the face of American cities and that culminated in the civil rights movement of the 1960s (Lemann, 1991). It was a story that touched a nerve in Philadelphia, which, prior to the Civil War, had the largest population of free blacks in the country and which was a key destination city for African Americans migrating to the North. And, in the spring of 2011, it was a story that was in the news because of the 2010 publication of Isabel Wilkerson’s much-acclaimed narrative nonfiction account of the Great Migration, *The Warmth of Other Suns* (Wilkerson, 2010).

Our course evolved from a similar course Beatty had offered through the English and the communication departments in the previous academic year. In that class, Beatty not only faced the inherent challenge of teaching the course for the first time (Wilson, 2011), but also the larger challenge common to all teaching of new media journalism—how to negotiate a balance between technology and content. In the first iteration of the course, students were taught to create and maintain their own WordPress.com blogs on topics of their own choosing. The course blog was a WordPress.org site, which allowed more options for the instructor, but did pose some problems when the two platforms handled tasks, such as video embedding, differently. Following brief introductions to HTML, CSS, and PHP, students learned how to manage a WordPress blog; how to shoot photos and record audio for a Soundslides presentation; how to shoot, edit, and post video; how to record, edit, and post audio; how to host video on Vimeo (which we prefer) and YouTube; and how to optimize Web images in Photoshop and FTP them to a server, in addition to receiving basic reporting, interviewing, and writing instruction. The first course also included content on mapping and data visualizations, for example through EveryBlock and Many Eyes, and discussions of SEO and metrics.

A key rationale behind the initial course offering was that journalism students are now expected to have a public platform to present their work, and the blogs from the course could be expanded to create an electronic portfolio. The course also gave students a chance to get their work published via the Internet rather than simply submitting assignments to the professor for class credit. Granted, there is evidence that even a lot of what “professional” bloggers do is

still more like writing an op-ed piece than it is doing original reporting (Leccese, 2009). But as Reese, Rutigliano, Hyun & Jeong argue (2007), blogs have arguably entered and even revitalized Habermas's "public sphere." As such, blogs need to be considered as possible career components and journalistic platforms for aspiring student journalists.

Du and Thornburg (2011) surveyed online journalists and instructors and found that both still stressed the need for news judgment, and grammar and writing skills, above technical skills. Although news judgment is not the same as reporting and storytelling skills, Du and Thornburg's study does support the notion that teaching technical skills should not overshadow the need for journalistic fundamentals. Indeed, online journalism, as it is practiced by some, may not, at this point, differ all that greatly from more traditional print journalism. Reich (2011) found that at major professional news organizations in Israel, print and online, and to a lesser extent, radio reporters "invest strikingly similar reporting efforts to obtain their information" (p. 292). Print reporters, however, were found to rely less often than online reporters on press releases and more often on leaks, which suggests that they are still more likely to produce exclusive and important stories based on first-hand reporting.

Not surprisingly, then, in the initial course offering, students by and large gained technological savvy, but their blogs focused on their personal interests and did not go very far in producing meaningful original content, let alone journalism in the public interest. One student, for instance, built her blog around fashion, and another around a pro sports team, although some did focus on topics within their major or minor, such as English grammar and the environment.

Building on the lessons learned from Beatty's first class, we set out to offer a revised version of the course that not only gave students the technological tools they needed to create their own blogs, but that also required them to practice critical journalistic skills to report on a substantive topic. In producing multimedia content about the Great Migration, the students would have to do background research about an important event in American history; they would have to win the trust of a group of African American elders and persuade them to tell their sometimes painful migration stories in great detail; they would have to get to know the predominantly black and low-income neighborhood where the elders lived; they would have to practice good interviewing techniques, hon-



Student Nina Burke goes over keepsakes with James Mosley.

ing their ability to listen; and they would have to pull all their findings together in print, still photography, video, and sound.

The tension between teaching skills and teaching the fundamentals of journalism has no doubt always been present, but it reached a peak in the mid- to late-2000s when curricula wrestled with the notion of convergence. Most educators, and many media outlets, agree that core skills (some subset of reporting, research, critical thinking, writing, and grammar) should still take precedence in journalism education (Fahmy, 2008; Aumente, 2007; Pierce & Miller, 2007; Shepard, 2007; Stewart, 2007; Castaneda, Murphy & Hether, 2005). CUNY Graduate School of Journalism Dean Stephen Shepard studied other schools undergoing convergence and noted "an overemphasis on technology at the expense of journalistic skills" (2007, p. 72). Phil Meyer noted in 2002 that overemphasis on skills could lead to graduates who "will be mere techno-widgets who function like trade school clerks, not real journalists" (as cited in South & Nicholson, 2002, p. 15). On the other hand, Castaneda, Murphy and Hether (2005) cite several authorities who see technical skills as predictors of students getting hired, or who say that the potential benefits of incorporating multimedia skills are worth the slight risk of crowding other material out of the curriculum.

We felt, and the student work may indicate, that efforts taken to build relationships with our seniors, and to build understanding of context about the Great Migration for the students, meant that we privileged substance in the interviewing and reporting over technical sophistication. In other words, what suffered more in our case was the use of the technology, rather than the reporting. Even though many of

the students had had courses in video production, the production values of the videos that the six groups produced, and some of the other blog content such as audio posts, were lower than hoped for. Larger journalism programs often address this sort of concern with labs or tutorials out of class—we did not have that luxury.

We sense, then, that students would be better served by a course that minimizes the time devoted to technical demands. Dworznik and Tullis (2011) developed a course similar to ours in a similar academic setting (3,000 undergraduates, 50 journalism majors) at Ashland University. Their final project comprised a print story, a video, and an audio slide show, as did ours. Theirs was an ambitious course that required three previous multimedia projects. However, absent apparently the effort we spent developing relationships in the community, they note that “this [final] project was plagued with problems” (p. 8), including subjects unwilling to be on camera, or canceling interview appointments. We, indeed, had some of those problems, but were able to complete several interviews with all six seniors. Had we not done the groundwork to ensure their completion, with generally substantive content, we could not have produced the final 30-minute documentary. No doubt it is better to have content of substance with weaknesses in the video techniques than the reverse. Echoing our experience, O’Callaghan and Reynolds (2009) had students produce living history documentaries that benefited from considerable time spent in selecting and contacting candidates to participate in their project. They note, as would we, that “it is important for students to build a relationship with those being interviewed before the filming begins” (p. 36).

Although our agenda was ambitious, we benefited from the fact that 15 of our 19 students were senior communication majors who had already successfully completed most, if not all, course requirements in the journalism track. These requirements included courses in beginning reporting, advanced reporting, electronic reporting, video field production, and community journalism. Most of the students had also been reporters for *The Collegian*, our weekly student newspaper, and most had also worked for La Salle 56, our on-campus cable television station. The majority of the students had done at least one internship in journalism or public relations, and several had done multiple internships. Thus, most of our students arrived in our class having already mastered basic re-

porting, writing, and video-production skills. What they lacked were Web-based skills, such as how to maintain a blog using WordPress, and how to shoot and edit video and associated audio captured with Flip cameras.

During our 14-week course, we devoted about seven weeks to the teaching of Web-based skills. This was enough time to give students the fundamentals about key technology, such as WordPress, Soundslides, and Audacity. We incorporated components now common to most multimedia online journalism classes: All students maintained a WordPress blog, recorded, edited, and posted audio, slide shows, and video, and did a long-form print piece and several backgrounders, although we did not cover databases, mapping, and SEO.

Video instruction included techniques Beatty learned during a one-week seminar for educators at the Poynter Institute, and resources already developed by multimedia educators such as Mindy McAdams at Florida, and Katie Culver and Sue Robinson at Wisconsin. There are good free resources on Vimeo’s Video School site and Poynter’s NewsU, as well. Class time was devoted to practice shooting and editing for slides, audio, and video, and Beatty posted demonstration projects for each format.

Our instruction was augmented by outside experts. For example, we brought in a videographer from WHYY, Philadelphia’s public broadcast affiliate, to talk about video story-telling on the Web and how that differs from the kind of television news packages with which the students were familiar. Although most of the students had reporting experience, we felt it was important to refresh their memory about key issues, such as interviewing techniques, and to review some of the basics about writing for story—for instance, how to show rather than tell. Thus, we wove these topics into class sessions in the run-up to the field interviews, which took approximately four weeks.

Because of time constraints, we did not include the use of social media as part of our course. Since most of our students were already adept at using social media, however, we did not consider this a significant loss. Time also prevented us from requiring our students to fact-check the migration stories as recalled by the elders, one of whom was 96 years old. Although we were aware of the potential pitfalls, we reasoned that as a practical matter, it would have been very difficult to verify details of stories that happened

40 or 50 years ago, often in small towns of the Jim Crow South, where acts of violence against black people often went unreported by public officials and by the news media. What's more, we were clear with the students that these were tales as recalled by participants in the Great Migration and that our presentation of the stories would make that clear.

Our class required us to address a number of challenges before the students began their reporting. These included: finding a community partner who would help us identify African Americans who had taken part in the Great Migration; developing a curriculum that focused not only on technological and journalistic skills but that also provided students with an historical understanding of the Great Migration; finding a way to help our students cross the boundaries of race, class, and age in order to conduct their interviews; and figuring out how to blend our very different backgrounds and talents in order to team-teach the class.

Getting a community partner

In order to report about the Great Migration, we needed to partner with a grassroots organization in the black community that might provide entree to elderly African Americans who had migrated to Philadelphia from the South and who would be willing to share their migration stories. We turned to Center in the Park, an award-winning senior center in the Germantown neighborhood of which La Salle is a part. For two years, the center had been a reporting site for students enrolled in community journalism, the capstone course of the communication department's

journalism track, and the relationship had been beneficial to both the center and the university.

Although officials at Center in the Park were enthusiastic about partnering with us for yet another course, they also had a number of questions and concerns. Chief among them were the issues of consent and control. Center officials wanted to ensure that the seniors not only gave their fully informed consent to the interviews but that they also had some control over public dissemination of their migration stories via the Internet. Although we had no problem with informed consent (indeed, we could not proceed without it), we wanted to ensure the journalistic freedom of our students and avoid prior restraint. After a number of conversations, we agreed that the students would share the video interviews with the seniors before the interviews were put online. If any senior felt the interview gave an inaccurate account of his or her migration story, then the students would consider revisions to ensure accuracy.

Doing background research

Although some of our students were vaguely aware of the Great Migration from studying American history, most knew next to nothing about it. To help our students gain background about the Great Migration and its historical context, we assigned them to read parts of *The Warmth of Other Suns* and to do other background research on their own. We were assisted by a librarian at La Salle who put together an online portfolio of photographs, films, video clips, and scholarly articles about the Great Migration, as well as a list of books about the subject. In addition, we invited a labor historian from nearby Temple University to talk with the students about the influx of blacks to Philadelphia during World War II and how these people assumed factory jobs and, later, public-sector jobs in government and education.

Crossing cultural divides

Although we would be reporting in a predominantly black neighborhood and the subjects of our interviews would be African Americans, just two of our 19 students were African American. Sixteen others were white, largely of Irish and Italian heritage, and one was Latina. There was also a 50- to 70-year difference in age between our students and their sources. And although most of our students were middle class, most of the seniors they would be interviewing lived on fixed incomes and in subsidized housing in an area of the city that the students had come to fear because

Our community partner was Center in The Park, a senior activity center in Philadelphia's Germantown neighborhood.





Tony Chandler



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of its association with crime.

To help our students cross these cultural boundaries, we asked the director of La Salle's multicultural center, an African American woman, to do a three-hour multicultural training session with the students during the first few weeks of class. We also sent the students into the Germantown neighborhood in pairs to do walking tours and to interview people on the street about what they liked and didn't like about living in Germantown. The results of their reporting went up on their individual blogs. Because we would be crossing so many divides (race, age, and class), we knew it would be important to build trust with the seniors before our students actually began reporting. To do that, we worked with Center in the Park to put together an event to kick off the project with a guest speaker about the Great Migration, followed by break-out groups in which each team of students would meet with the particular senior citizen to whom the team was assigned.

This was billed as an informal and off-the-record, get-to-know-you session. As a sign of respect, we took the center's advice and sent a formal letter of invitation to each of the six seniors who had agreed to take part. At the center's suggestion, we also counseled our students that they were to address the seniors as Mr., Mrs., Miss, or Ms., rather than calling them by their first names.

Learning to team-teach

Each of us brought to the class a different set of skills and interests. Beatty had particular expertise in technology, developed through the teaching of Web and print design classes. He also attended the one-week seminar at the Poynter Institute to further develop new media skills. Collins, by contrast, knew little about new media and was concerned about the impact it was having on journalistic standards. But she brought to the course more than 30 years of experience in reporting, including award-winning coverage

of school desegregation, the AIDS epidemic in Africa, and the global campaign to eradicate the polio virus. Both of us shared the belief that at the heart of good journalism is good storytelling.

Our class was offered during a three-hour block on Mondays. To prepare for it, we had two-hour meetings every Friday in which we sorted through what had happened in class the week before and planned for the next class. Beatty took responsibility for teaching the technology; Collins took responsibility for teaching basic journalistic skills, such as interviewing techniques. During class, we alternated leadership roles, depending on the particular lesson at hand. Our Friday conversations often turned into stimulating intellectual adventures as each of us learned from the other.

How the documentary evolved

Students in the class continued to build their individual blogs around the Great Migration, culminating in a package that included an individually produced slide show portraying their senior, and the video produced by their team. Near the end of the class, we realized that there was a wealth of material and untold stories that deserved a wider audience and a longer life than a one-semester course could afford. We proposed to a junior in the class that he sort through all the video, audio, and still photographs compiled by the six teams to come up with a single documentary on the Great Migration as told through the lives of the six seniors. We coordinated that effort in the fall, and the student received credit for an independent study course, culminating in the 30-minute documentary, *Journeys of Promise: Germantown and the Great Migration*.



[Link to Journeys of Promise: Germantown and the Great Migration.](#)

Technical lessons learned

In hindsight, we would do a number of things differently if we had the class to do over again. For one thing, we would have built the follow-up project into the initial course planning from the start.

The multimedia instruction could have been better realized in terms of planning and process, technique, and equipment. With regard to the process we followed with the students, we would in the future build in more time to review videos in progress. What students produced in their small groups was often essentially a first draft, with obvious shortcomings, such as a weak narrative arc.

One of the six groups had footage that was corrupted and could not be stored on the external hard drive we used to collect all the video, audio, and photos. That meant that the documentary producer had to go back and re-interview that senior, which resulted in less of that senior's story being incorporated. One suggestion might be to make sure all members of each group keep copies of the raw footage, as this problem was most likely due to one student's handling of the single group video file.

Where practical, students should be encouraged to take more photos in homes and apartments, and more clear shots of personal artifacts and mementoes; several seniors brought photos from their past that were poorly focused.

If a follow-up documentary is planned, clips should be compartmentalized and labeled, so that each clip is on a somewhat different topic and the files are named by topic; there was a lot of repetition in what the students recorded and the documentary producer was faced with unorganized material.

The documentary producer should have provided a complete written script early in the process and should also have shown a first cut early enough in the documentary process so that we could have suggested larger structural changes in content.

In terms of video technique, despite suggestions in advance, we ended up with videos that had a lot of shaky footage; shots with heads partly out of the frame; poor lighting, especially off glass cases and reflective surfaces; a lack of variety in camera angles; interference from background audio; and student interviewers who forgot to follow our No. 1 rule of interviewing, which was to ask the question and then be silent.

For the documentary producer, students should have stopped and started their cameras more often,



*Ulysses
Moore*

preferably with a second camera from behind the subject to allow for cuts in the audio; one group left us with a single static interview of perhaps 75 minutes, which is difficult to comb through for the best material. Also, all students need to shoot in the same aspect ratio; some footage was 4 X 3, while some was 16 X 9.

In terms of equipment, the Flip cameras we had available did not have an external mic input, which meant that the interviewer's questions, if students did want to include them, were usually quite a bit louder than the responses. Even if Flip cameras were not being discontinued by Cisco, we are planning on using an alternative, such as the Kodak Zi8, which will take an external mic that can be wireless.

We also recommend that all students use the same equipment—one group with television production expertise used a prosumer shoulder camera with an external mic, but that then meant that the sound levels were difficult for the documentary producer to mix alongside the Flip camera audio, and the prosumer files were saved as .avi rather than .mp4, which caused problems in the final edit.

Other simple but important equipment suggestions include bringing extra batteries for field recordings and having enough tripods, preferably full-size models, or small table-top gorilla pods.

Final outcomes

Although we have many ideas for how we might do things differently in the future, we believe our class was successful. It led to the production of a 30-minute, Web-based documentary that contributes to the public's understanding of the Great Migration. It helped students to combine substantive reporting with technological skills to produce their own blogs. And perhaps most important, it widened our students' world and helped them understand the struggle for racial equality in the United States.

The documentary that came out of the class,

Journeys of Promise: Germantown and Great Migration, received a positive reception when it debuted in November 2011 at a Thanksgiving luncheon that drew more than 200 senior citizens to Center in the Park. Soon, the seniors wanted copies of the documentary on DVD. After being posted on YouTube, the documentary also drew praise from several urban historians at the University of Pennsylvania, who said they planned to use it as a teaching tool in classes. We also hope to archive the documentary in collections at Temple, Penn, and at the New York Public Library's Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. Recently, the video was used as a training tool for 60 case managers at the Philadelphia Corporation for Aging, which wants to help those who care for the elderly pay more attention to the personal narratives of their clients.

Anonymous student evaluations at the end of the course indicate that the class did a good job of bridging the technology/content divide. "Cool projects," wrote one student. "Unique take on new application of journalism," wrote another. Said another: "Got a lot out of real-life experience. Had a chance to practice interviewing and editing." Another wrote, "Gives real experience with new technology." On the other hand, some students were frustrated because they wanted to pick their own topics to blog about. As one student put it, "As interesting as the Great Migration Project was, students might be more invested in a blog they designed themselves, although that might be difficult to measure." In addition, the course packed a lot of content into a relatively short time frame—three hours a week for 14 weeks. This, too, was noted by a few students in the course evaluations.

Apart from journalism, our course also widened

the world of our students, forcing them to leave the comfort zone of the La Salle campus and explore important issues related to the African American experience. For example, one of the elders included in the project insisted that she was not African American but French and Cherokee. Still, she came to Philadelphia as part of the Great Migration and had experienced the same kind of discrimination that African Americans had experienced. Was she black or not? Our students had to wrestle with that question and the larger issue of what defines a person's race.

Through the class, our students also came to appreciate the struggles of African Americans to achieve equality. Horace Preston, who had migrated to Philadelphia from rural Georgia, made an especially important impression on our students. Preston recalled that when he was 19, he was driving with his father on a country road in Georgia and their car accidentally hit a dog that belonged to a white family. He and his father took the injured dog to the family's home and apologized. Still, that night, two carloads of white men, all wielding guns, arrived at Preston's home and threatened to kill him. When they left, Preston's father put his teenage son on the first train to Philadelphia. Preston's story, which he recounted in a barely audible and raspy voice, helped our students understand the indignities and violence of the Jim Crow South.

Horace Preston died on Nov. 7, 2011, six months after our students interviewed him. Thanks to our students, his story will live on.

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