



‘Book Club’ Class Session in Media Writing Course

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With calls for more hands-on education in journalism programs, some students are learning from the greats, in their own words, through a book club setting.

Journalism students are live-blogging news, covering beats, writing and reporting and using the Society of Professional Journalists code of ethics. As a professor in a liberal arts program, I felt some of the breadth of journalism, and its history, was sidelined for practical skills. Our program moved away from a traditional textbook a year ago and we have been teaching the beginning media writing course with current news examples and supplements from sites like Poynter’s NewsU and trade publications.

The class felt almost too tactical, so I required students to select a book about a journalist to read. As individuals, they selected a biography or autobiography and pitched their selections for approval. The main requirement was that the book addressed some form of journalism; books focused more on tips for living, self-help or humor-oriented texts were disqualified. Selecting the journalist lets students find one they identify with, or want to learn about. I supplied a list of book ideas to get them started. Students provided the Amazon write-up for reference if I was not familiar with the book. Book approvals were issued by the second week of class and students had most of the semester to read their books. Students from previous semesters helped sculpt the list of appropriate books. For example, one semester a student read one of Stephen Colbert’s books that was more humor than it was an inside view into mass communication. He said the book was good, but not for this exercise.

After one semester of typical PowerPoint presentations, I suggested a book club setting where we talk about themes in our books and see what connections emerge. One class was all for it. No paper, no PowerPoint—they were in. In the other section, a book club-type class meeting edged out prepared presentations by a slim margin in a class vote. Students were asked to think about how their journalist came to the profession, what they were best known for, how they handled prickly situations with ethical or legal implications, etc. They needed to bring a question to ask the group to stimulate discussion. The carrot—if a robust conversation kept going and everyone participated—students would receive the maximum points possible, worth a 10th of their overall grade. The stick—if someone did not participate—he or she would be writing a paper, a long one, over the book.

On the day of the book club, students brought hard copies, digital access or notes about their books. We left our computer-laden rows and created a circle with our chairs. In a perfect world, I would have created a coffee shop feel with sofas, but we worked with our current room. Our media writing classes are limited to 15 students and taught two days a week in 75-minute sessions. I chose one day of the semester for our “book club” day, which provided ample time for all 15 students to participate fully.

The book club days were the kind you hope for as a teacher. Students were engaged and connections were made to the material. I felt the proverbial lights go on as they connected with their journalists and with recent history. Students read about a diverse group of journalists including Walter Cronkite, Bar-

bara Walters, Katie Couric, Dan Rather, Anderson Cooper, Oprah Winfrey, Hoda Kotb, Helen Thomas, Edward R. Murrow, Frank Deford, Molly Ivins, Bill O'Reilly, Tom Brokaw, Jackie Spinner and Robin Roberts.

During the one book club class meeting, students meandered through some knowledge-level observations of Bloom's Taxonomy to more advanced thought as they were asked to jump into the conversation when they saw a connection. At times, the connections were a simple "Your journalist was old, well, mine was really old." Topics like accuracy, what is newsworthy and changes in the news business were common themes in many of the books. Students chewed on whether or not they agreed and how their journalist (if dead) would feel in today's media market.

Students connected their books through historical events, some not as old to us, but "history" to the traditionally aged college student. Students made connections to concepts from their introduction to mass communication course the previous semester and the technological advancements of radio, TV and the Internet. When the books contained scenes from Hurricane Katrina, students analyzed how reporters handled crisis and if it coincided with their understanding of the SPJ code. Most of the journalists talked about interviewing presidents, allowing students to draw contrasts between the interviewers' styles and relationships with particular presidents (and possible conflicts of interest).

The diversity of books added to the discussion. Forcing students to read the same book might not have created the same atmosphere. Multiculturalism was a poignant part of one class meeting as members talked about nasty comments made to an African-American reporter, or how a reporter changed her dress and persona while in another country.

Students also questioned the motives of particular authors. This was especially true for *Katie: The Real Story* by Edward Klein. One student suggested having someone read a book by Couric to balance the potential bias in the two books.

I slide into the background of the classroom, resisting the temptation to jump in unless necessary, as the students drove the discussion. Very few times did I act as the moderator moving the discussion in any one direction. We did not experience any one student dominating the conversation and moving into a "presentation" mode, but instructors could help keep the discussion fluid by asking facilitating questions like,

"Whose journalist talked about a bad interview experience or his or her first interview?" I told students it was their job to move the conversation along, so they accepted the driver's seat with little extra encouragement.

The students saw their subjects as people, former high school and college students, much like themselves. Situations unrelated to journalism, like a disapproving family or a fight with cancer, entered the conversation. Questions about how journalists handled situations and how the students would have handled the same situations offered a rich ethical discussion.

Bravery, dedication, perseverance and other adjectives bounced around as the students decided which qualities their journalists shared. They felt a sense of awe for journalists in war zones and other tough situations. The students questioned if they would be able to operate similarly. Coupled with their own hands-on experiences during the semester, they gained a keener appreciation for the plight of a journalist. A semester's worth of lessons came together in one class period and I felt like the students truly "got" what it means to be a journalist.

Using a book club for a class session is not a novel idea (ha, ha), but in the quest for more hands-on, practical skills, I think it is important to weave into our students' experiences some history, multiculturalism and stories from journalists who have paved the way. At the least, they will have read a mainstream book about a journalist before that first job interview.

Best Practices

- Remind students throughout the semester to read. The syllabus provided benchmarks for reading, like have one-third of your journalist book read by such-and-such date.
- Introduce students to the interlibrary loan system for no-cost ways to secure texts or have a librarian aware of the assignment ahead of time as a resource for the students.
- If one person reads the unauthorized biography, have another in the class read the authorized one for comparison.
- Don't fret if two people pick the same book; they are drawn to different stories and their varying viewpoints can enhance the discussion.
- Timing the book club toward the end of the semester, after students have practiced being cub reporters, gave them experiences similar to the people they were reading about.

- Books about a collection of journalists like *Seen and Heard: The Women of Television News* were harder to discuss. Where others had one journalist to talk about, students who chose this type of book had quick vignettes of many journalists. Comparing apples and oranges was difficult.
- Room set-up matters. Arrange chairs for better face-to-face discussion and encourage students to share with one another, not just you.
- Melt into the background and let the students run the show.
- Have students recommend books to include on the list for the next semester.

Book List

Here are some of the book titles I supply to get them started. Culled from Internet searches and others' suggestions about what every journalism student should read, it is not meant to be an exhaustive list, but one to point students toward acceptable texts and ones their colleagues have recommended, or have found in the library.

- *All the President's Men* by Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein
- **Audition** by Barbara Walters
- **The Big Show** by Keith Olbermann and Dan Patrick
- *The Boys on the Bus* by Timothy Crouse
- *Citizen Hearst: A Biography of William Randolph Hearst* by W.A. Swanberg
- **Edward R. Murrow and the Birth of Broadcast Journalism** by Bob Edwards
- **Front Row at the White House: My Life and Times** by Helen Thomas
- **Katie: The Real Story** by Edward Klein
- *Live from the Battlefield: From Vietnam to Baghdad, 35 Years in the World's War Zones* by Peter Arnett
- **A Long Way from Home: Growing Up in the**

American Heartland in the Forties and Fifties by Tom Brokaw

- *Me and Ted Against the World: The Unauthorized Story of the Founding of CNN* by Reese Schonfeld
 - **A Mighty Heart: The Daniel Pearl Story** by Mariane Pearl
 - **Molly Ivins: A Rebel Life** by Bill Minutaglio and W. Michael Smith
 - *Naked in Baghdad: The Iraq War and the Aftermath as Seen by NPR's Correspondent Anne Garrels*
 - **News to Me: Adventures of an Accidental Journalist** by Laurie Hertzle
 - *Of Spies and Spokesmen: My Life as a Cold War Correspondent* by Nicholas Daniloff
 - *Once Upon a Distant War* by William Prochnau
 - *Personal History* by Katharine Graham
 - *The Prince of Darkness: 50 Years Reporting in Washington* by Robert D. Novak
 - **A Reporter's Life** by Walter Cronkite
 - *Roi Ottley's World War II: The Lost Diary of an African American Journalist* by Roi Ottley
 - *Staying Tuned: A Life in Journalism* by Daniel Schorr
 - *Texas Sports Writers* by Bob St. John
 - *This Just In: What I Couldn't Tell You on TV* by Bob Schieffer
 - *Women Journalists at Ground Zero: Covering Crisis* by Judith Sylvester and Suzanne Huffman
 - **The Woman Who Fell from the Sky: An American Journalist in Yemen** by Jennifer Steil
 - *A Writer at War: A Soviet Journalist with the Red Army, 1941-1945* by Vasily Grossman
- Bolded titles reflect books students recommended for future semesters.

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