



Building an International Journalism Course on Student-Centered Experiences

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Abstract:

Foreign news reporting by U.S. news media has declined during the past few decades, and news organizations have been downsizing their staffs and closing foreign bureaus. Despite these trends, U.S. journalists who report from foreign countries give Americans the context necessary to better understand international events. These journalists must be familiar with the nature of international news and the different roles journalism fulfills in other cultures. Journalists aspiring to work internationally should be aware of challenges facing foreign correspondents, and they must be familiar with global geography. An international journalism course can help develop these skills while introducing students to a potential career.

Introduction and Rationale

There has been a significant and continual decline in foreign news reporting among America's news media during the past few decades (Kumar, 2011). That coincides with a decline in interest among the American public in foreign reporting (Pew, 2012). Whether it is a cause or an effect, American news organizations have been downsizing their staffs and closing foreign bureaus (Enda, 2011). This decline in full-time employment has created opportunities for freelancers, who sometimes lack the training necessary for international reporting (Keller, 2013). Despite these trends, U.S. journalists who report from foreign countries give Americans the context necessary to better understand international events (Schidlovsky, 2010). These journalists must be familiar with the nature of international news and the different roles journalism fulfills in other cultures. Journalists aspiring to work internationally should be aware of challenges facing foreign correspondents, and they must be familiar with global geography. An international journalism course can help develop these skills while introducing students to a potential career.

The international journalism class that I created focused on four primary objectives: introduce students to journalism's various styles and traditions throughout the world; examine differences in news coverage by English-language broadcasters from across the globe; cultivate awareness of current issues affecting international journalism and journalists; and encourage journalism students to improve their knowledge of world geography. The course sought to accomplish these goals by promoting student-led discussions of our textual readings; viewing and analyzing various international television news programs; curating online content regarding international journalism and sharing it through social media; and quizzing students on world geography. The curriculum was designed to enable students to build knowledge about numerous facets of international journalism through their experiences in the course (Kolb, 1984).

Activities

Students were introduced to journalism's various global practices and perspectives through the primary textbook (Hachten & Scotton, 2012) and sup-

plemental materials (Siebert, Peterson, & Schramm, 1984; Christians, Glasser, McQuail, Nordenstreng, & White, 2009). To make the classroom experience more interactive and engaging, tables were arranged into a large rectangle to encourage face-to-face dialogue. Students initiated and led daily discussions of the text in a casual, conversational fashion. I followed up on any topics that needed further examination or explanation.

Viewing and critiquing news content from several international broadcasters was a core component of this course. Eight English-language news organizations were chosen for examination, and students spent a half hour of each class watching live or on-demand news programming from one of the following: Press TV (Iran), France 24 (France), NHK World (Japan), CCTV (China), RT (Russia), Link TV's "Mosaic" (Middle East), Voice of America's "In Focus" (Africa), and Al Jazeera English (Qatar). It should be noted that live-streamed news content from Al Jazeera English became unavailable in the United States after the August 2013 cable launch of Al Jazeera America. Link TV announced in April 2013 that its "Mosaic" program would be placed on indefinite hiatus.

Online news content was presented on a classroom projection system. Students were asked to make observations about the news organization's story selection, cultural or political perspectives, journalism practices, and other items that piqued their interest. After each viewing, students discussed their impressions, asked questions, and recorded any interesting observations from their classmates. They used these notes to produce a two-page analysis of any, or all, of the broadcasts they watched each week. Analyses were typed and double-spaced using Times New Roman 12-point font with document margins set at one inch on all sides. Students wrote five of them throughout the semester.

It was important to this course's success that students establish a clear connection between what they discussed in class and what they observed in journalism's actual practice across the world. To further encourage that awareness, students were required to find online news reports about issues affecting journalism or journalists in non-American settings. They were asked to examine the content and then share it through Twitter by writing a short statement about the material, providing a link to the original source, and then tweeting it to their followers. They did this four times during the course. Additionally, the Soci-

ety of Professional Journalists' International Journalism Committee used its Twitter account to retweet the students' content, providing their tweets with an even greater online reach. Students who did not have a Twitter account at the beginning of the semester were asked to establish one to fulfill the course requirements.

It is imperative that students studying international journalism have basic knowledge of world geography, so I distributed maps at the beginning of the semester for the countries we studied in class. Students took a weekly quiz that focused on a particular region of the world: Asia, Africa, the Middle East, Europe, and Central and South America. They completed five quizzes, one for each region. The syllabus explained which geographic area would be covered each week, so students could study that region exclusively. To maintain consistency, I gave quizzes with the same maps found in the students' packets, but without the identifying language. Countries were numbered, and students were required to list each country's name in its corresponding numbered slot.

Debriefing

The class was created as a special topics course taught during a summer term. Day-to-day results were consistent. The course met Monday through Thursday for two hours, and students quickly adapted to its rhythm. News analyses were due on Mondays, and tweets were due on Wednesdays. Geography quizzes were on Thursdays, and text discussions occurred every day except Wednesday. Students watched an international broadcast during every class. It was rare for a student to miss an assignment or not participate in class discussions.

Appraisal

Because students were responsible for initiating and managing classroom discussions, they paid greater attention to the text, vigorously participated in the conversations, and asked relevant questions. The same held true for critiquing the international broadcasts. The requirement that students make notes on the content promoted better concentration and observation, which resulted in thoughtful analyses. However, this activity did have a manageable limitation. To view the content from numerous news organizations, the class had to work around varying broadcast schedules. NHK might offer a newscast during our class time while France 24 might offer an interview show. The

times that we joined these programs also depended upon when students finished discussing the reading assignment. Students were quite flexible with this and recognized the inherent challenges of viewing different live news programs during each class.

Incorporating Twitter into the course allowed students to become familiar with that social media platform while also using it to actively share news about international journalism. This helped them become more knowledgeable about current events and also enhanced their own social media presence. This activity, too, came with a potential limitation. It is easy to lose students' tweets in a cacophony of social media posts. For grading purposes, it is more convenient to require students to take screen shots of their tweets and then submit them through a class web portal, via email, or by some other method. As for the geography quizzes, students accepted them not with disdain, but rather as a fun challenge. They indicated that they appreciated this requirement because the quizzes helped them overcome some latent anxiety about their lack of geographical knowledge.

Each of these activities was designed to complement the others. Students used what they learned in their text to inform their weekly new analyses. Memorizing maps helped students place an international news event into the appropriate geographical context. Tweeting about the challenges facing journalists in other countries helped students make clear connections between what they were seeing in practice and what they were discussing in class.

Students evaluated the course positively and rated it as a valuable experience. Their feedback was strong enough that a version of this course was taught at the graduate level in the summer of 2014, and a permanent international journalism course has been added to the undergraduate journalism curriculum and is scheduled to debut during the summer of 2015.

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