



Opening Storytelling Up: Pushing Students to Go Beyond Traditional Storytelling Forms

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Abstract:

An open-form story format in a Multimedia Reporting class had the goal of students telling the best story without the encumbrances of traditional media. Students should think creatively about how best to convey information and what tools to use. They are required to include at least four unique and original elements like graphics, mapping, text, video, photos and timelines, among others. They should push themselves and journalism storytelling.

Objectives:

The goal for this assignment is for students to tell an engaging news story without the encumbrances of traditional media in an open-form format. Students should think creatively about how best to convey information and what tools to use, using at least four unique and originally produced elements. They should push themselves and their journalistic storytelling and learn new storytelling techniques along the way. By doing this assignment, students should become comfortable experimenting with new tools and technologies.

Introduction and Rationale

Students love specifics. They want to know exactly how their grade will be determined and what to do to get the grade they want. Journalism has always been a bit difficult to quantify, and it's harder now amid technological disruption. With that challenge, I introduced an open-form story format in my Multimedia Reporting class.

Journalism is changing rapidly and has changed dramatically throughout the years, as was articulated by Finberg and Klinger (2014): "What was, in one era, an essential journalism skill might be utterly (or comically) irrelevant today" (p. 1). Likewise, research by Wenger and Owens (2013) shows "it may be time for journalism programs to rethink the multimedia skills that should be required" (p. 31).

New journalism and digital storytelling tools are being introduced daily, and some that may seem rev-

olutionary one day may seem passé the next, or so it seems (Newton, 2014). A key is for students to be flexible and comfortable adapting to new storytelling forms because it is not possible for journalism programs to teach students everything in a curriculum (Lewis, 2010).

It is not possible for us to teach our students every program or app. In fact, chasing after each one can be counterproductive because it means we're spending less time on more important foundational issues such as reporting, writing and storytelling. We need to produce students who can confidently use their own initiative to find a compelling way to complete an assignment.

Description of the Activity

The goal with this required story in Multimedia Reporting—students are also required to do video-cen-

tric stories with multiple elements—is to get them to think organically about the best way to tell a story so that it connects with the public.

Students are required to produce at least five multimedia stories as part of the class, including at least three of the video-centric stories mentioned above. Students are also required to complete at least one open-form story. The fifth story can be either form, depending on their interests and the needs of the story.

For the open-form story, students are required to include at least four unique and original elements—graphics, mapping, text, video, photos and timelines, among others. The number is not arbitrary: Students often default to what they know when telling multimedia stories. So many students will naturally produce text, video and photo stories. Requiring a fourth element forces students to go beyond their comfort zones.

The course does not prescribe the order of the video and open-form stories with the idea that students will apply the appropriate storytelling approach to each assignment. The class discusses an extensive list of potential storytelling tools, and the students get links to additional resources.

In class pitch sessions, students discuss their story ideas and what approaches they can take. Most stories include text as one of the four required elements. Social-media posts and interactions are in addition to the four required elements. In addition to story-pitch sessions, students also take part in brainstorming and story-map sessions where the entire class discusses both what the audiences need to know about the story and the best ways to convey that information. Students report and gather information and elements, hopefully knowing which elements they wish to include, or at least some of those they wish to pursue.

We review stories as they are produced in class. Students walk the class through his or her story, what elements were included and why, as well as lessons learned. Other students provide a critique and ask questions.

Debriefing

This assignment began in Multimedia Reporting at TCU in Fall 2013. Students have been surprising with their creativity and their discovery of new tools like thinglink and Juxtapose that helped their storytelling and their classmates. Students say they like the freedom to tell stories in new ways.

This assignment also sets up a framework for approaching the semester-long project in the TCU Multi-Platform Capstone course, which requires a long-form journalism project with at least four unique and original elements, as does this assignment.

Appraisal

Many students initially struggle with what elements they are going to include for their story. They often think of it as an impossible task. After we do the brainstorming sessions in class and in individual conferences, students realize the multitude of possibilities for multimedia storytelling.

Additionally, students often run into trouble when they do not plan for producing four elements when they start their work. After a story is reported is too late to successfully produce a multimedia story because students missed opportunities to gather visual elements.

While many students will work in newsrooms that expect them to produce specific types of stories, mostly broadcast or print, students also need to be comfortable thinking about how the audience will best experience and process the information. While most students who enter journalism do go on to work at broadcast stations or newspapers, they often produce digital content and impress managers with their ability to turn stories into compelling multimedia presentations.

This assignment underscores the importance of being a self-starter and approaching stories in the way that is best for that story. If students can effectively and creatively approach this open-form story, they will be successful in journalism no matter the newsroom or the way in which journalism evolves.

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References

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