



Practice Makes Perfect? A Longitudinal Study of Experiential Learning in Sports Journalism

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Abstract

The following longitudinal study examines an intermediate-level sports journalism course from its inaugural semester, 2015 to 2017 (N=198). The course was designed as a stepping stone within the school's larger teaching hospital model, where students could experience industry processes, but not yet at the level of their more senior peers working in the sports bureau, who are ready to produce professional-level work. In this course, students had to reach out to a community publication, pitch their work, identify novel beats and angles, and publish at least six stories in said community publication before the semester's end. What results show, however, was that publications with lower quality professional standards were more eager for student contributions, while established legacy media were less interested. This led to a bottleneck of students seeking press credentials from only a few area high schools schools, which led to tension between the journalism school and these local intuitions. This is a concerning gap in experiential learning in journalism classes, particularly in sports journalism classes designed to be an "equivalent" of other courses with wider subject breadth.

The University of Missouri-Columbia opened the first journalism school in 1908. But the education of sports journalists – *specifically* sports journalists – did not come until much later. It wasn't until 1996 that Ashland University in Ohio began offering a sports communication program, followed by Springfield College in Massachusetts in 1999. By the early 21st century, at least a quarter of Association of Schools of Journalism and Mass Communication-accredited institutions offered sports journalism courses (Hardin, Dodd, & Lauffer 2006).

Though these sports journalism tracks vary in their structure and department homes, they share a common purpose: To meet the needs of emerging sports journalists. This attention to sports journalism

accompanies the rise of the Teaching Hospital Model in journalism education. The Teaching Hospital Model arose as a response to "a sense that journalism was in trouble," but that journalism schools were not appropriately answering that crisis by producing better-trained journalists (Carnegie Knight Initiative for the Future of Journalism Education, 2011, p. 1). In the Teaching Hospital Model, journalism education is approached like a profession, similar to the medical field. According to Newton (2015), the Teaching Hospital Model is a system in which college students, professors and professionals work together for the benefit of a community.

The Teaching Hospital Model is rooted in Experiential Learning Theory. Experiential learning

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is “learning in which the learner is directly in touch with the realities being studied. It is contrasted with the learner who only reads about, hears about, talks about, or writes about these realities but never comes into contact with them as part of the learning process” (Keeton & Take, 1978, p. 2). “Hands-on” learning experiences like internships, field work, in-class exercises, and, on a larger scale, Teaching Hospital Model, are examples of experiential learning. However, selecting the kind of experiences that result in “genuine education” is a particular challenge for educators designing courses for intermediate-level journalism students, who do not yet have the experience to produce polished content that will interest professional news organizations. The following study examines results of questionnaires completed by intermediate-level sports journalism students in Arizona State University’s JMC 302: Sports Reporting course. Questionnaires were collected at the end of each semester, between the fall 2015 and fall 2017 semesters (N = 198), to bridge this gap between creating experiences that are “genuinely educative” for novice students (Dewey, 1938, p. 25) and the larger Teaching Hospital Model. The objective of the course was for students to identify a beat they’d like to cover, contact an editor at a local news publication and pitch the beat, and publish at least six of the nine stories written in JMC 302 in that local news publication. What results show, however, was an unintended consequence. Niche online publications that were eager for high school sports content willingly accepted student contributions. More established legacy media, however, were less interested. Since the most popular publication students in the current study published was a niche, online-only high school sports site, several students sought press credentials from only a few area high schools. This led to tension between the district and the journalism school’s relationship. This was a design pitfall for a sports journalism course created to be the “sports equivalent” of the established news course, which had wider subject breadth.

The following paper contains a review of experiential learning, the Teaching Hospital Model and journalism education, and an explanation of this study’s sample. Method, results, and conclusions sections follow.

Literature Review

Experiential learning is “the sense-making process of active engagement between the inner world of

the person and the outer world of the environment” (Beard & Wilson, 2006, p. 2). It is a philosophy that pulls together theories of learning, education, training, and development, involving “hands on” learning experiences, like internships, field work, and in-class exercises (Beard & Wilson, 2006). Twentieth-century scholars like John Dewey and Kurt Lewin placed experience prominently in their human development theories. Their objective was to create a model for the experiential learning process and a linear model of adult development (Kolb, 1984).

According to a 2005 analysis by Kolb and Kolb, the theory is built on six tenets:

Process, not outcome. Learning, or “the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (Kolb, 1984, p. 41), is best conceptualized as a process, not an outcome. This process includes feedback on effectiveness.

Relearning. Learning is relearning, using processes that draw out students’ previously held conceptions of a topic, so they can actively examine those conceptions, test them, and integrate new, refined ideas to those conceptions.

Conflict. Resolution of conflict, moving back and forth between opposing modes. “Conflict, differences, and disagreement are what drive the learning process” (Kolb & Kolb, 2005, p. 194).

Integration. Learning is not just cognition. It’s integrating thinking, feeling, perceiving, and behaving.

Synergy. Learning results from synergetic transactions between the person and their environment; equally assimilating new experiences into existing concepts while accommodating existing concepts to new experience.

Creating knowledge. Learning is the process of creating knowledge, which “results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience” (Kolb, 1984, p. 41). Unlike traditional models of formal education, in which preexisting, fixed ideas are transmitted to the learner, this model aims to create social knowledge within the learner’s personal knowledge.

Feedback should include objective analysis, because biases may hamper lesson objectives from having the intended impact (Brehmer, 1980). Time also needs to be designated for students to contemplate and to synthesize these lessons (Kolb & Kolb, 2005).

Journalism instructors have grown increasingly interested in experiential learning after scholars and professionals called for journalism curriculum overhauls (Finberg, 2013; Newton, Bell, Ross, Philipps,

Shoemaker, & Hass, 2012; Newton, 2012; Anderson, Glaisyer, Smith, & Rothfeld, 2011; Parks, 2015). Newton et al. (2012) urged university presidents to “update their curriculum and upgrade their faculties to reflect the profoundly different digital age of communication.”

Instructors like Parks (2015) have responded by designing projects that bring together students in separate skills-based newswriting and editing courses to create a weekly live online news report. Because surveys, interviews, instructor observation, and formal course evaluations were implemented, researchers could gauge how well their desired objectives were learned. The Parks (2015) study also responded to earlier, scholarly calls for journalism instructors to pay closer attention to the *characteristics* of our learning environments – something Brandon (2002) said was missing in journalism education’s then 131-year history. This includes not just designing course objectives but considering how the environment supports these objectives.

Teaching Hospital

The Teaching Hospital Model originated in the medical field. The first teaching hospital, where students practiced on patients under physicians’ supervision, was recorded as early as modern-day Iran’s Sasanian Empire (Browne, 2001). In journalism education, the Teaching Hospital Model derives from the philosophy that journalism should function like a profession, similar to the medical field. According to Newton (2015), it is a:

system of immersive education in which college students, professors and professionals work together under one ‘digital roof’ for the benefit of a community. A fully built-out hospital does more than report the news. True teaching hospitals engage with their communities. They invent and test new things. They are connected with the rest of the university and teach open, collaborative, creative teamwork.

In this model, students are taught how to produce content, while being encouraged to create content in ways that previously have not been done. Instructors are hired fulltime to supervise this immersive journalism experience. According to Rosenstiel (2013), “The journalism they produce is better, more digital, more connected to the community, and helps make up for some of what’s disappearing from commercial newsrooms.” This results in not only training emerging

journalists but producing journalism that competes with commercial news and focuses on experiential learning (Thrastardottir, 2013).

But innovative projects can be costly and time-consuming. This can be a problem for tenure-track faculty, who have heightened research responsibilities. There is also concern over how much to allow commercial interests to shape pedagogy, especially to normalize giving student-made content to local news outlets for free (Sharp, 2013; Parks, 2015). To collaborate with community news outlets, those outlets have to have the resources necessary to contribute to journalism students’ experiential learning process. This is key in intermediate-level journalism classes, where students’ work is not as polished as professional-quality content.

Method

The new sports journalism major at Arizona State University launched in the fall of 2015. JMC 302: Sports Reporting was designed to be the “sports equivalent” of JMC 301: Intermediate Reporting and Writing. Both courses teach reporting and writing techniques, beat development, writing techniques, and journalism fundamentals (e.g., newsworthiness, journalism ethics). Like 301, 302 has a publication requirement. Students are to publish at least six stories by the last day of class. To do this, students must do the following:

1. Identify a beat they’d like to cover. They cannot choose professional or NCAA sports because those beats are reserved for more advanced students in other classes. They may choose high school, community college, university club sports, or another novel beat approved by the instructor.
2. Contact an editor at a local news publication.
 - a. Pitch their proposed beat.
 - b. Give editor list of the type of stories students are required to write this semester.
 - i. Three game stories
 - ii. Press conference or breaking news story
 - iii. Governing body/education story
 - iv. Feature story
 - v. Legal issue
 - vi. Business or economy story
 - vii. Final enterprise story
3. Email instructor link to published story or verification from editor that story will be published.

The class instructor grades these stories based on a rubric enclosed in Appendix A. Stories must be be-

tween 500 and 800 words, with the exception of the final enterprise story, which must have at least four human sources and at least 1,500 words. At least six stories need to be published by the end of the semester, or the editor needs to provide verification that the story will be published.

A challenge of implementing the Teaching Hospital Model is that students at the JMC 302 do not yet have the expertise to identify and to create content that appeals to professional outlets (Reed, 2014). According to Mercer University Assistant Professor Adam Ragusea in a 2015 *Nieman Lab* article, freshmen and sophomores are not ready to create professional-quality content. If a story needs a few more hours of work, it may or may not get that attention, depending upon the other course(s) students need to attend. "I have on many occasions so thoroughly re-reported and re-written a student piece of publication myself that the final product shared nothing but the most primordial DNA with the original," Ragusea (2015) said.

Because of the scholarly gap in marrying experiential learning for intermediate sports journalism classes and the Teaching Hospital Model's tenant of collaborating with community news outlets, this paper explores the following:

RQ1: What types of publications (i.e., characteristics) will publish intermediate-level sports journalism students' work?

This research question will be explored through descriptive statistics and correlations.

Because of the importance of timely feedback (e.g., Eisenstein and Hutchinson, 2006; Brehmer, 1980) in experiential learning, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1: The timelier students perceive feedback from editors to be, the more easily students will fulfill the course's publication requirement.

This hypothesis will be tested with a regression, with timely feedback from editors as the predictor variable and ease of meeting the publication requirement as the dependent variable.

RQ2: What factors best predict whether students fulfill the course's publication requirement?

This research question will be explored with a regression. Predictor variables will be timely feedback from editors, satisfaction with the relationship they had with their editor, timely responses from sources, ease of finding transportation to events in their beat, and the semester the course was taken. The dependent

variable will be ease of fulfilling the course's publication requirement.

Protocol

Questionnaires were administered to each section of JMC 302, beginning with the fall 2015 semester (three sections, 54 students total) to the fall 2017 semester (four sections, 73 students total), including summer sessions. The questionnaire asked students about their beat and where they predominately published during the semester, including how often the news organization published a print version (i.e., daily, weekly, monthly, other). If their publication was online-only, students were to choose "not applicable."

To determine how well students' environment was contributing to the course objectives, students were asked to rate their level of agreement on a 5-point Likert scale (1 being strongly disagree, 5 being strongly agree) with a series of statements. These statements were about the students' ease in meeting in the publication requirement, the timeliness of feedback from their primary editor/publisher and sources, their satisfaction with the relationship they had with their editor/publisher, and their difficulty getting to events covered. The survey concluded with demographics questions and space for students to comment.

Results

Of the 279 students enrolled in JMC 302 across the seven semesters, 198 completed the survey, for a response rate of 71%. The majority of students were sophomores (108, or 54.5%) and juniors (61, or 30.8), with 19 seniors (9.6%), 4 fifth-year and beyond students (2%), and 1 freshman. There were 120 male students (60.6%), 73 female students (36.9%), and 5 students who did not report a sex (2.5%). Most students were sports journalism majors (190, or 96%).

To address RQ1, the most popular publications through which students published were AZPreps365.com (74, or 37.4% of sample), followed by the East Valley Tribune (13, or 6.6%) and The Blaze Radio (10, or 5.1%). AZPreps365.com is an online-only content provider, operated by MaxPreps and where the Arizona Interscholastic Association's 266-member schools may report scores directly ("Contact us," 2017). In the fall 2015 semester, only two students published with AZPreps365.com. But during fall 2017 semester, 40 students claimed it as its main publication.

This was part of a larger trend. In the fall 2015, the 42 students surveyed were spread among 21 pub-

lications. By the fall 2017, the 49 students surveyed were spread across 8 publications – the majority of them at AZPreps365.com (40). *State Press* had three students, while the remaining publications had one student a piece. One student heralded AZPreps365.com because it allowed “so much more content variety” on the site. This mattered for the purpose of this class because, besides game stories, students were required to produce a sports-related press conference or breaking news story, a governing body or education story, profile, legal issue, and business or economy story. AZPreps365.com was eager for this content. Though happy to have their story published, some students expressed a conflict of interest. The site is run by the AIA, an organizational sports body students are supposed to be critiquing. One student wrote at the bottom of their questionnaire, “Why are they able to saturate their website with articles that were only written because the writers had to write them to fulfill their grades? Do they make money off of us?” It was also up to students to do most of the editing, which meant mistakes weren’t caught, another student wrote.

The opposite trend took place at large “legacy” media: Whereas *East Valley Tribune* and *Arizona Republic* had 8 and 5 students, respectively, in the fall 2015 semester, they dropped to 1 and 0, respectively, by the fall of 2017. This shows how the publications students chose shifted over time. There is a statistically significant low negative correlation between semester and how often students’ publications produced a print edition, $r = -.531$, $n = 194$, $p < .001$. Over time, fewer students published with legacy media and more went to the online-only publications. In fact, there is a weak negative correlation with print edition publication frequency and students’ satisfaction in their relationship with the editor ($r = -.162$, $n = 193$, $p = .024$) and if they would recommend the publication to a student the following semester ($r = -.151$, $n = 190$, $p = .038$).

Students cited the newspapers’ staff cuts and policies as being roadblocks to communicating with sports editors and understanding what kind of stories would be appealing. Publications printing daily and weekly editions also had more concise ideas about the stories they would accept. One student said the paper was only interested in game stories, which meant the other required stories for class were either published elsewhere, or the student wrote extra game stories to fulfill the six-story publication requirement. Other publications were interested in sports only if

it related to a larger issue. Multiple students commented that they did not think they should be held to the same standard as those publishing via online only or monthly publications. “(We) should be given a few breaks when it comes to the publication requirement,” a student said. “For example, there is no way any of my game stories could get published by them, so that’s automatically (three) stories that won’t count, but other people had them published in timely fashion, while it’s too late for me. Also, I am now left to scramble for remaining publications because [the newspaper] did not communicate well. (I know they had their own issues, but it’s still frustrating for me.)” Another said, “[It was] extremely stressful and predicated on high school coaches who either don’t want to talk to you or will not respond unless you get to them in person.” Other students said their publications gave them opportunities to cover events and stories that weren’t part of the class requirements, but were published and counted in their publication requirement. Some students were offered an internship upon completion of the course.

Another common problem, not limited to any type of publication, was that some news sources didn’t understand what the student was asking. “Wish they had a copy of the syllabus so they knew more about what was going on in a particular week,” one student said. Another said, “As a small-time paper, he’s not totally up to date on the [journalism school] or what we students have to accomplish, so it made timing and arranging plans for covering my stories a little difficult. His office is also a little ways away (about 25-30 minutes) from the [journalism school], so a student would definitely need a car.” Another student said, “[The university] needs to contact all of the schools in the district and make sure all of the schools are ok with being covered before assigning a student to its beat. Also, if the events are off ... campus, [the university] should provide transportation, because they require you to do it for the class.”

H1 predicted the more feedback students received, the more likely it was that they met the publication requirement. A regression found this hypothesis statistically significant, $F(1,194) = 30.72$, $p < .001$. H1 was supported.

RQ2 asked which factors best predict whether students met their publication requirement. A regression was done in order to determine which predictor variables (i.e., timely feedback, satisfaction with relationship with editor, timely response from sources,

getting to events, semester class was taken) best predict whether students met their publication requirement.

First, the data were examined for violations of regression assumptions. Little's Missing Completely at Random (MCAR) test was conducted in order to see if missing cases were missing at random (Little, 1998). Results of the MCAR test were not significant ($\chi^2 = 3.45$, $df = 5$, $p = .631$). This suggests missing cases are as likely to be missing as any other case. Also, no predictor variables had multicollinearity.

A regression found that the model explains a statistically significant amount of the variance in students meeting the publication requirement ($F(5, 190) = 12.18$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .243$, R^2 adjusted = .223). The analysis suggests that timely responses from sources, overall satisfaction with the relationship with the editor, and the semester during which the class were statistically significant variables. See Table 1 (below) for full results.

There was a low positive correlation between semester and how easily the publication requirement was met, $r = .151$, $n = 198$, $p = .034$. Overall, ease of publication increased over time: On the 5-point Likert scale of publication ease, students in the fall 2015 semester averaged 3.47 ($SD = 1.40$). By the fall 2017 semester, the mean was 4.04 ($SD = 1.11$).

There was no correlation between easily making the publication requirement and having a vehicle, $r = .094$, $n = 197$, $p = .190$. There was also no statistically significant difference between males' and females' responses in any of the categories.

Discussion

At this level of expertise, the "hospital" through which students produce news essentially takes place in two locations: Within the classroom, under the guidance

of their instructor, and at an out-of-house news source. There are advantages and disadvantages to this, as results suggest. In this sample, students were better off seeking online-only or team website publications instead of "legacy" media. Students observed these sites were more eager for content and less concerned about having polished prose. An issue of the editor-writer relationship, though, is that some editors didn't understand what the student needed to accomplish for class requirements. This can be addressed by asking course instructors to devote more time during the first week of class to teaching students how to pitch their ideas to publications. Another way of responding to this problem is to allow stories written for the publication but not in the class to count toward the course's publication requirement.

Also, many students sought the same nearby high school beats. This resulted in those high schools being overwhelmed with press credential requests. Such problems can negatively influence relations between the journalism school and the district, as well as discourage students. Instructors can respond by creating a quota system for such nearby beats, and reserving such beats for students who lack vehicles. Another way to address this would be for instructors to serve as editors for in-house-produced, online-only sites. Though this would decrease the chances for students to learn how to pitch story ideas to community outlets and to build those relationships, it would increase feedback and better balance experiences with academic knowledge.

Timely responses from sources, overall *satisfaction* with the relationship with the editor – not necessarily *timely feedback* – and the semester during which the class was taken were statistically significant predictors within the model. When determining the best publication outlets for intermediate students, the likelihood of an outlet to be willing to take students "under its wing" is crucial for publication requirement fulfillment. And because of the unpolished nature of most students' work, the publications most willing to work with students are publications that are most hungry for content.

Though these data contributed to the Teaching Hospital Model literature, there were limitations. First, this is only one sample, taken from one university. Results are not generalizable. For example, there was no statistically significant relationship between

Table 1. Regression Analysis predicting students' publication requirement completion

Variable	B	SE(B)	β	t	Sig. (p)
Timely feedback (editor)	.120	.087	.122	1.38	.168
Satisfaction with relationship (editor)	.305	.091	.292	3.34	.001
Timely response (sources)	.138	.069	.139	1.98	.049
Transportation ease	.098	.071	.097	1.38	.168
Semester course was taken	.116	.044	.172	2.64	.009

N = 196

having a vehicle and easily making the publication requirement. But Arizona State University is in a metropolitan market. A rural campus may find a lack of reliable transportation to be a much greater hindrance for students. Also, Phoenix has a plethora of private and public two-year and four-year institutions that had sports teams lacking coverage before this class's inception. These options may not be available in smaller markets. Second, the course sampled in this study launched in the fall of 2015. With only seven semesters of data, the class continues to evolve.

One of the weaknesses of this paper, however, is also its strength. Because this was conducted at an urban campus, these results should guide instructors on rural campuses and/or with fewer professional news outlets in their community. Even with a plethora of news outlets around this university, a bottleneck still formed. And newer, niche sports news sites may be receiving a lot of free content – which, in itself, is problematic. In the current study, a sports news site run by the AIA emerged as the most popular choice. However, some students covered the AIA, since it's the organizational sports body for high school sports. This conflict of interest was not lost on students.

Another element sports journalism instructors should consider is if the course they are teaching is intended to be an equivalent of something else. (The course studied here, for example, being the “sports equivalent” of the established intermediate news writing course.) Having the same publication requirement for the sports- and “non-“sports-reporting class makes sense theoretically, but not necessarily practically. Students in “news” courses have a wider breadth of subjects from which they can create ideas and pitch to outlets. Students in sports courses, however, had a smaller range of publications to choose from in the first place. As stated earlier, the publications that were interested in sports content either wanted game stories and nothing else, or cared nothing for game stories, and wanted only feature pieces that were about larger societal issues, inspected through a sports angle. This may have contributed to the bottleneck seen in this study.

Based on these results, the author recommends instructors looking to design such a course consider the advantages of keeping production, from start to finish, in-house as much as possible. The instructor and/or students could identify a beat or theme, and launch a website themselves, which they would maintain throughout the semester, potentially onward.

This would not only allow the instructor to have more control over the students' experiences, but also their grade. As stated earlier, students were required to publish at least six stories they wrote for class in a local publication. If they struggled to connect with a publication early in the semester, they had a harder time getting six stories published. If everything seemed to go well with a publisher throughout the semester, and then all the sudden the student stopped hearing from an editor (which did happen), a students' grade could suffer, through no fault of their own. An in-house publication could also carve out its own space in the local media landscape, taking on topics and beats untouched by the most established media. This in itself is creating an experience for students who are entering a landscape where reaching new audiences and angles is ever more important.

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Appendix A GRADING RUBRIC

With the exception of the final enterprise story, stories were graded based on this rubric. All stories begin with 100 points. Points are added or subtracted based on the presence or absence of the following:

Writing

- Effective lead and supporting material (+5)
- Effective organization and treatment of material (+5)
- Effective transition or introduction of material (+2)
- Ineffective or missing treatment of transition or introduction of material (-2)
- Ineffective organization or treatment of material, including but not limited to
 - Wordiness (-2)
 - use of jargon or clichés (-2)
 - Missing key details (-2)
 - inclusion of unnecessary, non-newsworthy or obvious information (-2)
 - repetition (-2)
 - redundancy (-2)
 - inappropriate choice of source or quoted material (-2)
 - unsubstantiated claim; statement lacking supporting evidence (-2)
 - incorrect word choice (-2)
- Ineffective lead that needs work or story that lacks supporting material for a lead (-5)
- Missing the lead entirely or burying it (-15)
- Word count (-5)
- Three human sources (-5)
- Missing contact information for sources (-5)

Mechanics

- Error or inconsistency in AP style (-2)
- Excessively long or complicated sentences or paragraphs (-2)
- Each spelling error (typographical mistakes are considered spelling errors) (-5)
- Each punctuation error, such as incorrect use of a comma, semicolon, colon or dash (-5)
- Each grammatical error, such as improper subject-verb agreement or noun-pronoun agreement, or misplaced modifier (-5)
- Minor factual error, such as an inaccurate street address or the time element if the effect on the story is relatively insignificant (-10)
- Misspelled name of a person, business, agency or institution on first reference, a misquote or other major factual error (Automatic F)
- Libelous material (Automatic F)
- Fabricated or plagiarized material (Referral to Standards Committee for review)