



A Course with a Client: Real-World Publishing with Classroom Constraints

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Abstract

In small journalism programs it can be difficult to devise courses that allow students to appear in a 'real world' publication. This article describes meeting that challenge with a course designed to produce written and visual content for one of the university division's website and social media pages, thereby fulfilling both a curricular purpose and a communications function for a branch of the university's administration. The course provides professional content for the equivalent of a public, non-profit client even though most enrolled students have little or no journalism experience. Success depended on a professional partner that understood the limits of student-generated content and on an instructor with a mentorship approach to teaching.

Introduction

It's a great feeling for an instructor to see students get their first professional bylines on a story or video that has migrated from course assignment to real-world media outlet. But it can be a challenge to meet the standards of either a mainstream publication or a client in the corporate or non-profit sectors when working with student journalists.

At UC Santa Barbara, the writing program is navigating this terrain with a course called Journalism for Web and Social Media in which students produce multimedia content for the university's division of humanities and fine arts. A course that serves the media needs of a campus administrative office must strike a balance between student learning and reaching best professional norms. But outcomes for both the students and the division have made it worth the effort. Situating an academic-professional partnership such

as this within the university has undoubtedly contributed to its success.

Students cover campus events and profile the division's faculty, students and alumni. These stories, anchored on the division's website and YouTube channel, are promoted on its Facebook, Twitter and Instagram pages. Students may also produce Snapchat and Instagram 'stories.' A parallel student internship course also provides media content to the division and carries out additional duties such as calendar entries, uploading photos and copy onto the website, and finalizing layout.

To date, I have been the sole instructor to both teach the course and supervise three to six interns per term, serving as *de facto* editor of the website's [updateable newsfeed](#). The major challenges include uneven student skill and instructor workload.

Keywords: Student Publishing, Student Journalism, Student Public Relations, Student Communications, Social Media

Course Description

There is no journalism school or journalism major at UC Santa Barbara. This upper-division, undergraduate course attracts students from all disciplines and fills a writing requirement and course credit toward a journalism certificate. It runs 10 weeks and is capped at 25 students, who enroll with varying skills in journalistic writing and video. Some have done professional internships or campus journalism prior to the course, but most are starting from scratch.

The course meets in a traditional classroom but simulates a professional setting. Students are told on day one that they are part of an editorial team and will be treated as reporters with the instructor as their editor. They must revise their work for grading and further for publication – but there is no guarantee their work will be published.

Students brainstorm story ideas, pitching them orally as well as writing budget lines. They learn they are operating on the public relations side of the journalism continuum and that the division's website is akin to a special interest online publication – not an independent news outlet. Their 'client' is the dean's office, and so any watchdog or investigative journalism would need to be pitched instead to a student-run campus newspaper.

In its first two years, the major assignments have drawn from the following five: [Blog](#): on student and campus life; [Q&A](#): a short interview-format piece; [News Coverage](#): an article and social media coverage of a speaker, event, meeting, initiative, award, book, or research; [Social Media Video](#): profiling a student in action; and [Profile](#): a feature on an student, faculty member, or alum.

All students have the same deadlines for the Blog and Q & A in the first four weeks. They choose to do the third assignment in one of weeks 5 through 8, a staggered schedule to keep the copy flowing and prevent students from competing to cover the same events in the same weeks.

Challenges and Solutions

The traditional twice-a-week class structure can make it difficult to respond in a timely fashion to events on campus, be they speakers and conferences or book launches and exhibition openings. The first articles usually begin appearing online four weeks into the term, and the pace of processing stories can ebb and flow unevenly throughout the year.

How then to feed the division's website and keep

it current? First, we keep the editorial focus on features more than news, and de-emphasize the time peg. Second, while students in the course provide most of the longer pieces for the division, students in the parallel internship program often carry out the quick turn-around social media coverage that keeps those pages feeling current. It helps that the division views the content as value-added, rather than essential to its daily functioning.

Offering real-time social media practice to students in the course is difficult since it would be a security risk to give them the division's passwords. The solution: for the Q & A assignment, students post on their personal social media pages and provide links or screenshots for feedback. But when covering a news event, they post photos and text to a private class Facebook page, and I cut and paste it to the division's social media pages. Student interns – who do have the passwords – often promote the class students' feature stories on social media once they appear on the website.

Student performance or motivation doesn't always match editorial priorities. Some of the best story ideas end up not running because a student failed to produce something publishable, despite several revisions. Or a student might abandon work on a story after the initial submission has been graded. Those students who are headed for careers in journalism are keen to work toward publication even beyond the end of the course, but others fail to respond to emails once the grades have been submitted. Occasionally, I've moved a story over to an intern to fill some holes if we really wish to see it published.

The instructor-as-editor model means a higher than average workload. I often interact with students during evenings and weekends on multiple revisions and monitor the class Facebook page to re-post social media items in a timely fashion. As a result, I have become increasingly selective about which assignments to nurture toward publication, alerting students whose stories are sub-par to revise them only for their grade then move on without publishing. A class size of fewer than 15 would be optimal. Screening out students with no proficiency in journalism might also reduce the instructor's editing load and raise the student's chance at a byline.

Outcomes and Response

A numerical analysis at the end of the first year found 80% of students saw at least one of their as-

signments published, and many got two or three. Those who chose the news assignment option also had their social media posts published on the official pages – and all students practiced social media writing and digital tools during the course.

In the absence of a live newspaper or magazine-based class, it is clear that students enroll in this course to gain publishing experience on a campus where the only alternative is student-run media outlets unlinked to journalism courses. Many students stress this in narrative evaluations they are asked to write at the end of each term.

Here are three representative comments:

- “An excellent way to get a taste of the real world of journalism.”
- “I loved that we actually were creating content for the Humanities and Fine Arts website and social media. This allowed me to feel as if my assignments actually meant something.”
- “Courses like this, where you create content to build your portfolio, are essential.”

Meanwhile, the division of humanities and fine arts has embraced the media content and views its ‘student’ character as a plus. Social media engagement has steadily increased, and during the first year of the course and internship unique visitors to the website tripled. The division is currently conducting research into whether the uptick has contributed to higher enrollments among incoming students.

Conclusion

Tailoring classes and assignments to the media operations of a university division poses obstacles that go beyond those in a conventional journalism course. Still, the rewards are substantial for both students and the division. Although it only partially fulfills the “[teaching hospital](#)” model of journalism education, it provides a feasible way for small programs without newsrooms to offer a professional publishing experience. This course would be even more successful if it were part of a journalism major and could limit class size. A professional collaboration that is ‘in-house’ on campus offers a viable option for student publishing.

Nomi Morris teaches journalism in the writing program at UC Santa Barbara and directs its journalism certificate program. She previously taught at the USC Annenberg School of Journalism and Communication and other universities in California. Before transferring to teaching, she spent more than two decades as a national and international journalist, including serving as TIME’s Berlin correspondent and as the Middle East Bureau Chief for Knight Ridder Newspapers (now McClatchy).

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