



Using The Beat System to Connect Students to Journalism

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Abstract:

Not all of the students in Writing for News Media courses at Eastern Illinois University are journalism majors. In fact, typically just as many are majoring in public relations, communications studies, or even other disciplines. However, in today's social and political culture, as well as our media-driven society, understanding what news is, and how it should be communicated, is not relegated to those specifically learning the craft. It seems more vital than ever to engage college students in critical analysis and discussion of news, but perhaps in a different way than they have previously done in academic or personal spheres.

At the World Journalism Education Congress 2016, Katherine Reed of Missouri Journalism School presented a metaphor shift that solidified this need into a growing paradigm of practice. She pointed out the flaws in the ubiquitous "teaching hospital" model of journalism education, instead shifting to a "test kitchen" notion. Her impetus?

... one essential part of a journalism education must be producing something for an actual community, or for a specific purpose, and measuring how it does and is shared. Even the smallest journalism programs should make this a priority, and it's included among the goals of the "teaching hospital" model (Reed, 2016, § 17)

For the fall semester of 2016, EIU Department of Journalism Chair Dr. Sally Renaud and I endeavored to create a basic news writing course that allowed students at the first level of journalism education to engage in its practice, noting Reed's (2016) philosophy that this helped students focus on their responsibility to the news consumers.

We wanted to expose our students to the reality of news writing—storytelling that is research and relationship-based, using information actually disseminated and read by an audience. In-class exercises, however well-meaning, aren't the same, and our goal was to turn those 15 or so students in each of our news writing sections into journalists for at least a semester, so they could see both the effort and the purpose behind our craft.

The process started by brainstorming beats with the student daily newspaper, *The Daily Eastern News* (DEN) as well as its yearbook, *the Warbler*, and our local PBS affiliate, WEIU. These were the media in which students could publish, so topics needed to be both salient and also non-repetitive for those staffs. For instance, the newspaper already had students assigned to the meetings for university committees and other state budget issues, but that meant those reporters didn't have as much time for service groups, modeling clubs, or transportation.

With a list of 20 beat options for each section—ranging from student technology to tutoring to Af-

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rican-American groups—students were instructed to avoid conflicts of interest but select a beat they'd be interested in covering for the semester. The next step, then, was to teach basic journalistic research. From investigating related student organizations to Boolean searching online to using local media for reference, students were encouraged to learn everything they could about their beat, and they regularly shared their takeaways in class, continuing to brainstorm to gain a multitude of ideas.

From there, they identified several preliminary sources for interviews with the goal to get information and understand of their beat as fully as possible. This is key—and a process that many general assignment reporters either skip or don't have the luxury of pursuing to the depth they may prefer. Each student needed to be an expert on his or her beat because knowledge would lead to the best sources, most significant details, and most effective storytelling.

Students' research, preliminary questions, and initial interviews were then submitted in memo format—along with a number of specific story ideas they could pitch to student media editors based on this foundational work. The students took tours and participated in introductory meetings with all three student media. The process was then to choose a relevant outlet for their first idea, pitch it to a student editor, and begin interviewing and crafting the piece under the direction of student editors—and student editors only—until publication.

In the meantime, units on each type of journalistic writing were taught in class: print, broadcast, and digital, as students started publishing the stories on their beat. During the latter half of the semester, each of the three stories was pitched, written, edited, and printed in a two- to three-week window that took us to the end of the semester.

To celebrate the budding journalists, the published stories were clipped out and pinned on the wall in the classrooms, highlighting bylines and publicly recognizing accomplishments. There is still nothing that compares to a student who has published for the first time, especially those students who never thought they would have experience with student media.

However, the rubber truly met the road with this experiment when the students started their third story. Stories one and two came fairly easily, but many reporters had to dig deep in order to find a third angle within their beat for publication.

This marriage of fundamentals, specific skills, and



Students in Writing for News Media compose stories in the computer lab on deadline. Just above these two students is the wall of published articles in student media, meant to spur on their efforts as working journalists.

practical experience was an attempt of Amy Webb's (2015) blueprint for J-Schools where she offers a curriculum in three parts: "a foundation of exceptional liberal arts scholarship; robust, forward-thinking specialized concentrations in journalism; and a compulsory experiential learning component."

To spur this on, we enacted a real-world reporting process that we did corporately, again combining both sections. Students analyzed a city council agenda, attended a city council meeting and interviewed members and speakers after. They then immediately returned to the classroom and typed up a news story to recreate the feel of a vibrant, busy newsroom through a writing-on-deadline experience. It was a positive, bonding time for both classes (specifically in fall of 2016 because of the Chicago Cubs game playing on the big screen as they wrote—a game that would later lead the Loveable Losers to a World Series title). It also gave these students more practice and confidence that they could write real journalism about real issues that affected people's real lives, as they headed into their third round of beat stories.

This is where many students began to shine. They started working their known sources, pushing to find people and ideas they didn't know, and by then their understanding of news values and new writing techniques had evolved. Their third beat publication, no matter the student media outlet, had matured, as evidenced where assessment scores for each successive story rose.

In the beginning, the aim was to introduce the beat system, connect students with student media, and allow experimentation with different types of journalism, but ultimately, the goal was for the Writing for News Media students to tell stories that needed to be told and witness the beauty, and intense effort, of that process, including its authentic effect on an audience. This purpose has been echoed ever more loudly by journalism educators as “journalism curriculum must not only equip students with a particular skill set and broad social knowledge, but must also show students how journalism participates in the production and circulation of meaning” (Skinner, Gasher, & Compton, 2001, p. 342). Through this process, students found new facts, people, and ideas across the campus and community. Others found abilities they didn’t think they had. Most students left the beat system and the publishing grind with a greater appreciation of what news is and what it takes to achieve an informed audience.

One of the most profitable aspects of this system was that our student media had a flood of pitches, and although they weren’t always on track, and sometimes required **much** revision, there was a higher level of traffic in the newsrooms. This was positive in many ways, and it ended up benefiting the student media editors as well, as they took these young, unsure writers under their wing, which built the skills and confidence of the editors too.

Longer term few students became willing converts through the process. Some added a journalism minor, and others became contributing reporters after such training and practice. Still others, in their dogged pursuit of facts and sources, came to respect ethical, meaningful journalism in a way they never did before, and they spoke of journalism in a different way by their final reflection essay.

The initial concept was successful enough that this year’s editors were enthusiastic to continue it for the benefit to their staff and newsroom.

For the sections of beginning news writing at EIU, using beats to truly grasp a subject, and then publish good storytelling about it multiple times for public consumption, was foundationally valuable, and was deemed as a method worth continuing. It irrevocably changed our students’ perspectives on journalism in a time when understanding the craft is essential. It also gave these students, whether they were majors or not, the mantle and responsibility of the title “journalist” for that space and time, which they wore proudly.



Writing for News Media students track down the mayor of Charleston, Ill., as well as city council members for further questions after a meeting. Real-world applications like this one helped students to be more dogged in the pursuit of beats.

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