



## Newsroom vs. Classroom – Some Major Misconceptions

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A few jaws dropped, some eyebrows went up and at least one smile turned into a frown. This was the classroom response as I answered a student's question: What was your first job in journalism?

Students were taken a bit aback at my tale of working 11 p.m. to 7 a.m., writing police and crime briefs for the Metro Desk at the Associated Press wire service in New York City.

"It was the graveyard shift and I sat by the police scanner and listened for potential stories. It was fun!" I said in "Intro to Journalism," one of four journalism classes I teach at Marist College in Poughkeepsie, NY.

It didn't sound like fun to them but students' ideas about working in newsrooms often clash with reality. This includes the realities of educators who have extensive journalism resumes.

We'll call that student reaction to my "graveyard shift" story "Clash No. 1" and the remainder of this article focuses on this and other "clashes" that come up over and over in classrooms.

Student inexperience, expectedly, contributes somewhat to their misconceptions about newsrooms. Also at the heart of these clashes are students' growing and unrealistic expectations of what's ahead in the workplace after graduation.

So, back to Clash No. 1, where the student viewpoint on first jobs in journalism often boils down to this misconception:

*I'm going to do internships, study hard and work on*

*student news media in college, so won't I be qualified for more than an entry level job that involves, say, working weekends or overnight shifts?*

Every new reporter has to pay his or her dues. With a 24-7 news cycle, beginning reporters can expect to be working strange shifts, writing obituaries of ordinary people and maybe doing research for senior reporters who will be getting the byline. It's a starting point, a first step.

A few weeks after that first wake-up call in class, we had Clash No. 2. The initial round of stories had been critiqued and sent back. In more than a few instances, students found out their viewpoints belong nowhere in their journalism articles.

The misconception: *Journalists write subjectively, starting from the beginning of their careers.*

It can take a while for students to wrap their heads around a major rule in my classes – the reporter is invisible. Report on the facts and how others say they feel about those.

To be fair to today's students, they are immersed in social media that trains them to share their feelings about everything with virtually everyone. Turning that switch off is very difficult, but in most journalism, objectivity is the goal, even if it's an elusive one at first.

Here's a good classroom exercise to help with this. Have students research the careers of people who are commentators on topics such as politics and sports. Then have them research the careers of these

folks. What they'll find is that they either have lots of expertise in the subject area they're being paid to talk about, or they worked their way up the journalism ranks until they were trusted enough to have informed opinions. In early journalism classes, we're working on building the reporting foundation. Commentary, if it comes at all, comes much later.

Clash No. 3 is a spinoff of the last item. Students may become so focused on what comes right after college, they think: *My first career path will be the only one I'll have in my life so I better choose a good one.*

No wonder senior students get antsy as the days tick off to graduation. Last spring, I spotted a senior journalism student sitting on the floor in a hallway, bent over her laptop, barely noticing the people flowing around her.

"How are you doing?" I asked this "A" student.

"I don't know what I'm doing after graduation," she sighed.

"Breathe in. Breathe out," I said. "You're smart. You work very hard. You'll be OK."

This angst is not limited to journalism students. Our increasingly hyper-competitive societies in western culture contribute to this situation. Journalism students, however, may be a bit more nervous since the job market in the profession has been less than robust in recent years. Students should know that their journalism skills of writing, researching, interviewing and creating content are transferrable in other media fields. In a variation of the exercise mentioned above, invite media professionals into the classroom to discuss the jobs they've had and different fields they've worked in.

For fun, have student do some quick research on Mark Twain and other famous writers who have "journalist" on their resumes.

On the day that the most recent group of Intro to Journalism students heard tales of working the overnight shift in a newsroom, I'd written on the board all the newsroom roles I'd had. The list went from the top of the board all the way down to the bottom. That was second shock they had that morning.

There were a few more to come when reporter colleagues dropped in to discuss the stories they'd covered, which included traumatic events. After one such visit, students wanted to know why anyone would want to stay in journalism.

This brings up Clash No. 4, which stems from this misconception: *Journalism seems like it's hardly ever enjoyable because it involves covering unpleasant events in*

*the world.*

For the record, it is not enjoyable to interview people who have been through trauma. But it is enjoyable to tell their stories with feeling and sensitivity, and it's satisfying when that story is printed, posted or broadcast, especially if it leads to social change.

The "enjoyable" part is working in a setting where the work seems insurmountable but somehow gets done by teams of people who are highly motivated, very skilled, extremely competitive and have terrific senses of humor. And they're willing to do it all over again every day because they take their responsibility very seriously.

It's exhausting and energizing at the same time. Understanding this reality provides a backdrop for all the amazing things you're going to teach students about journalism. Eventually, they will get it when you say it's "fun" covering murder and mayhem at 3 a.m. in the Big Apple.

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