



Adjunct Faculty: How to Better Prepare Journalists for Teaching

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Abstract

Higher education institutions value adjunct instructors who come to the job with current industry experience; however, this provides challenges for those new to teaching at journalism and mass communication programs. Yasmeen Ebada and Amina Zaineldine outline their experiences as Egyptian journalists who also are adjuncts at the American University in Cairo. They discuss the advantages and challenges of relying on adjunct faculty and how universities could better prepare adjunct faculty to teach.

Adjunct Instructors on the Rise

Part-time or non-tenure track instructors, also known as adjunct faculty, constitute approximately 70% of college faculty in the U.S. Since 1985 adjuncts have steadily represented the bulk of faculty across higher education (Kezar & Maxey, 2016; Krantz, 2020). The University of Southern California's (USC) Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism had 83 full-time faculty members and 120 adjunct professors in 2014 (Barnes, 2014). In fall of 2019, our home institution, the Department of Journalism and Mass Communication (JRMC) at the American University in Cairo (AUC), had 22 adjunct faculty instructors and 16 full-time professors (AUC, 2019). Some of the adjunct faculty instructors included professionals who covered sports for Al-Ahram Online, worked for BBC Arabia and BBC, worked as video journalists for Agence France-Presse (AFP), worked as chief

corporate communication officers at banks, and some had over 10 years of experience in advertising. While thousands of part-time faculty members across various universities in the United States have been laid off since the start of COVID-19 (Krantz, 2020), demand for adjunct faculty has been rising at some universities, including at AUC. Since the cautious return to in-person instruction in Fall 2021, after a university-wide vaccination campaign, the JRMC department has seen a rising demand for adjunct professors to accommodate a larger number of smaller classes. The teaching composition of the department includes 35 adjunct and 13 full-time faculty members.

Former dean of the Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism at the City University of New York (CUNY) Sarah Bartlett emphasized that a strong adjunct faculty was instrumental to the success of journalism departments. Adjunct instructors

Keywords: Adjunct Faculty, Writing Instruction, Journalism Education

are positioned to teach students to stay up to date on the latest technologies and developments in the industry, evolve the curriculum, and to provide valuable insights for fresh journalists. “At the CUNY J-School, in the heart of the nation’s media capital, that has led us to augment our full-time faculty by tapping New York’s reservoir of highly skilled professional adjuncts” (Bartlett, 2015).

Despite adjunct faculty representing the largest portion of university employees globally (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015), opportunities for professional development are not as easily accessible to them as they are for full-time university staff (Kezar & Gehrke, 2013). For example, adjunct faculty members’ contracts could be signed without a warranty of continuation; they do not have a fixed salary and are paid per course; and they do not have the same access to research opportunities as full-time or tenure-track faculty (Brennan & Magness, 2018). Additionally, COVID-19 has worsened the situation. The first staff to be laid off were adjunct faculty, and despite their fear of speaking up about the prospect of teaching remotely, many decided against it fearing that it might risk their chances of working at all. Many were forced to return to campus to teach. If they did return and contracted the virus, they would not be able to come back and their salary would be suspended (Krantz, 2020).

Among the reasons universities increasingly rely on adjuncts is the evolution of disciplines, which includes the expansion of course offerings and materials (Baron-Nixon, 2007). Moreover, it is cheaper for institutions to hire adjuncts than full-time staff (Anthony et al., 2020).

Scholars argued that adjuncts are hired because of their “specific skill sets” (Cohen & Brawer, 2003). In a field as practical as journalism and mass communication (JMC), technological advancement and changes in professional practice mean that practical knowledge is essential to many who wish to pursue a career in the field. This is where adjuncts can play a vital role: by applying their up-to-date professional and practical knowledge, “[they] are supplementing, not replacing, full-time faculty” (Brennan & Magness, 2018).

At AUC, the course catalog speaks eloquently of the importance of practical skills within the structure of a degree in JRMC. Students take practical skills courses throughout their entire time in the program. Some of these classes include entry-level courses such

as Mass Media Writing or Intro to Podcasting, flagship courses such Audio Production, reporting for the university’s newspaper, and the Multimedia Reporting Capstone course. This confirms the need for current practitioners who can support the creation of continuously up-to-date curricula.

With this growing trend of reliance on adjunct faculty, and as current adjunct faculty and journalists, our position is that universities have the responsibility to better equip adjunct faculty for teaching, and more specifically to support pedagogical trainings that align with the faculty members’ skill sets—in this case, their professional experiences. We will discuss how we’ve connected our practical experience in journalism to our experiences as first-semester adjunct instructors teaching Mass Media Writing at AUC.

Adjuncts Rely on Newsroom Strategies

In the course we are teaching, students with no prior knowledge are learning the fundamentals of news writing. The course objectives include selecting and organizing material to build a news story using the inverted pyramid structure, determining newsworthiness, writing strong leads and nut paragraphs, using the Associated Press (AP) Stylebook writing guidelines, enhancing spelling and grammar, conducting interviews, verifying information, attributing quotations correctly, successfully identifying credible news outlets, understanding the journalistic research process, and using social media for exposure and distribution.

We discovered that to attain these learning objectives, the students must spend a large portion of their time writing. We contend that this is one of the most effective ways to improve news writing skills, and thus we have implemented weekly in-class and take-home writing assignments, as well as regularly scheduled quizzes. We also avoid structuring classes in the form of linear lectures, rather we engage students in an interactive class environment. Additionally, the JRMC curriculum at AUC follows a practical approach, and thus, many JRMC faculty teach in a similar way—assigning hands-on classroom activities.

We did not receive formal university teaching preparation. Additionally, we were notified in late summer about the teaching positions; one had approximately a month to prepare and the other had one week. In this brief preparation time, we communicated with the chair of the department of JRMC and the course coordinator on how best to prepare—they were helpful in answering questions and providing

some necessary structure.

Furthermore, we received instruction on how to structure assignments and lectures from the course coordinator. We also received sample syllabi from faculty members, as it is a core course and mandatory for students majoring in multimedia journalism, communication and media arts, or integrated marketing communication. We were informed that the learning outcomes of all sections of this course must be the same. We also received suggestions for online modules to use as guides for creating lessons or lectures, and we are using *News Writing and Reporting for Today's Media* by Bruce D. Itule and Douglas A. Anderson (2008). In the short time given, we used this material to create our own syllabi. This preparation, which was particularly limited in terms of teaching techniques and class management, led us to rely on our professional experience by implementing real-life newsroom strategies as a part of our pedagogy.

Practicing Journalists Apply Their Skill Sets

We contend that our strength lies in the fact that we are both practicing journalists, and, therefore, argue that journalism departments must train their faculty to develop and apply their specific skill sets. Lopez and Louis (2009, p. 2) wrote,

A strengths-based education begins with educators discovering what they do best and developing and applying their strengths as they help students identify and apply their strengths in the learning process so that they can reach previously unattained levels of personal excellence.

An example of an in-class assignment includes writing a news story under a deadline. Professional journalists are constantly writing under deadlines and must write accurately under that pressure. We have implemented that same technique during the in-class assignments. Students are required to write news pieces during class time while following the material that they learned in the previous classes. For example, if students have learned how to write a lead, then we both expect them to demonstrate that ability in a future assignment. This will help them become better equipped for the journalism world upon graduation.

We experienced some limitations, however, that we believe to be avoidable with the help of formal training specifically tailored for teaching journalism and harnessing practical experience in a classroom setting. For instance, while editing fellow journalists' work in a professional setting may require setting cer-

tain standards, the standards for correcting the work of inexperienced students are entirely different.

We faced the challenge of creating assessment rubrics; we did not have a guide. As first-time adjunct faculty members, a guide on how to create such an evaluation tool would provide students with fairer and more effective feedback. Appropriately evaluating students' improvement from one assignment to the next has also proved to be a challenge. Preparatory modules or courses for first-time adjunct instructors could help alleviate this issue. As professional journalists, assessment was a challenge for us because expectations differ significantly between editing the work of other professional journalists and that of inexperienced students learning this material for the first time. As working professionals, education jargon was also unfamiliar territory for us. An assessment tool that states what students should have learned by specific weeks in the semester would help adjunct instructors benchmark progress. New adjuncts also need awareness of some educational principles, such as student-centered course design. We are learning those instinctively along the way.

Departments Can Support Adjuncts

This article has illustrated that there is generally a rising demand for adjunct faculty, and journalism departments are hiring such professionals to provide students with real-world journalism experience. Therefore, universities need to implement pedagogical training, which would help prepare new adjunct faculty to teach. As described above, with the limited time we had to prepare, we used teaching pedagogies that played to our strengths—providing students with opportunities to practice and experience authentic journalism.

Journalism departments have the opportunity and responsibility to support adjunct faculty by implementing such trainings to help them harness their professional strengths for application in a classroom setting. These pedagogical trainings will help adjuncts reach their full teaching potential. Moreover, since there is an increasing need for adjunct faculty, opportunities for professional development also need to be as accessible to them as they are for full-time staff. When all members of a university institution, adjunct, tenured, or full-time receive the same opportunities for professional growth, all members, students, and faculty benefit.

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