



Listening for The Echo: How Our Students Are Stepping Into, Embracing Community Journalism

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The idea started like this: a University of Georgia journalism course could take over the editorial side of the only news organization in neighboring Oglethorpe County—a weekly newspaper about to close its doors. When the department head asked about the concept, hatched by a UGA alum/newspaper group founder and our dean, we saw the depth in such an opportunity; we would turn a failing newspaper into a nonprofit learning lab to repair and benefit both local news and our students' experiences with community journalism.

Through work with the Cox Institute's Journalism Innovation Lab and Georgia news organizations, we had been trying to create cohesion between journalism students and local news in incremental, temporary ways. Yet, UGA journalism graduates often passed up smaller newsrooms for legacy, metro papers and national cable brands.

This opportunity—taking over the 148-year-old *Oglethorpe Echo*—was like striking gold. It had immense value for our students and an industry in atrophy at the expense of a functioning democracy. Of course, there was much to work out—and quickly. It was in the weeds of curriculum and newsroom development, however, that a journalism education endeavor worthy of reflection and further development emerged.

Traversing Deserts for Purpose

In research built upon interviews with residents, Mathews found that a newspaper's closure deeply affected everyday lives and a sense of community.

... the suggestion that 'life is harder' without the newspaper surfaced frequently. Without journalists in the county, residents acted as reporters themselves, sifting through websites and social media accounts for critical information, often with frustrating results (Mathews, 2022, p. 1260).

All in the industry know this instinctively. Saving *The Oglethorpe Echo* became a mission-driven project for UGA journalism faculty and students, but we needed more than passion to sustain us. We looked to other news-academic partnership models, like the University of Kansas, Northeastern University and Duquesne University, to see how these collaborations served communities and became experiential learning tools (Allen, 2021; Salahi, 2021).

We found our model would have to be different. We were creating new products (a website, four social media channels and an email newsletter), but also taking over a newspaper that had been printing for nearly 150 years. Although *The Echo's* editorial side would be staffed by a class for most of the year, we would not take breaks when students transitioned. We hired a

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The UGA journalism students who became the first capstone staff of The Oglethorpe Echo in spring 2022.

(Photo/Sarah Freeman)

part-time managing editor, with decades of local news experience, and paid a “bridge” group of seven interns until the next academic semester. Beyond getting the newspaper out every week, which was a minor miracle throughout November and December of 2021, we set big goals for our first capstone section. Based on *The Echo’s* historical deficits, we would publish reporting where people were (hence the digital products) and be intentional about underrepresented sources and issues (an informal content audit also showed mainly white and affluent residents’ voices).

Devising the Syllabus

The course was designed to offer experiential learning plus mechanisms to help students understand a community. The first day of class was a school bus tour of the county, led by the public school district’s superintendent. Students then completed a community audit focused on chosen beats that had research, interviews, observations, photography, graphics and video work—put together in a collaborative document. Professional development sessions included interviewing, building rapport and sourcing, covering underrepresented people and issues, and solutions journalism. And then, just three weeks into the semester, students were fully responsible for the editorial content of *The Echo*—its weekly newspaper and newly created seven digital products.

Once we became a newsroom, the philosophical underpinnings of experiential learning activated. Many scholars point to Kolb, but Joplin’s (1981) work “On Defining Experiential Education” was best for our newsroom process model. (And yes, Laura Joplin is the sister of Janis Joplin, as a fun-fact bonus.)

Joplin (1981) asserts five stages: focus, action, challenge, support/feedback (throughout) and a debrief. For us, this meant a pair of students per beat enterprising and publishing multiplatform stories—one every other week. After pre-reporting, they’d pitch in a news meeting, be challenged to grow the story, report, move through a multilayered editing process (two student copy editors, instructor and editor), and debrief once published. Inside of this spiral structure were Joplin’s (1981) characteristics, which include student-based content, personal interactions, a process/product orientation, internal and external evaluation, and individual growth as guiding metric.

Developing a Newsroom Process

Newsroom, the UGA journalism live broadcast and digital news organization, is also staffed by journalism capstone students, so *The Echo’s* newsroom concept came from that structure. Students try everything as they rotate through job descriptions. For *The Echo*, this meant a student’s “week off” from reporting deadline was spent in a specific role: copy editor, visual/graphics editor, engagement editor, or as producer for our Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, website or email newsletter. Students were often editing video, working in a CMS, or diving into Google Analytics without much prior experience. We created walk-through guides and videos and prompted students to help each other. We encouraged experimentation, and because we were the county’s only source for local news, a culture for quality completion developed.

The Drawbacks and Gaps

If this seems like a lot, it is. Weaknesses included lack of a “real” newsroom and community feel (both 18 miles away), a heavy workload for students with other classes and jobs, and not enough reimbursement for travel (especially with high gas prices).

Turnover is part of the model, making deep understanding and rapport challenging. And, our take-over wasn’t actually solving the problems plaguing most local newsrooms—unless they were situated close to a specifically resourced j-school program (Salahi, 2021).

The Echo is also quite intense for the faculty, which is consistent with research.

We have found that faculty members who seek to create or manage sustainable news-academic partnerships often find they face some of the same problems that editors at local news outlets report, such as burn-

out, high workloads and low pay. The faculty members we spoke with also felt pressure to deliver professional-level multimedia journalism out of classrooms where students are still learning the craft, as well as the required technologies. (Salahi & Smith, 2022)

Creating Community Journalists

There's pressure on students in a program like this. They are swooping in from the outside, trying to listen, understand, and earn trust while telling meaningful stories. It's not easy. Yet, the qualitative comments from our first-semester reflections revealed tangible benefits.

Given the rural nature and slow pace of life in Oglethorpe County, this class certainly strengthened my ability to generate story ideas. Getting to know and understand people in the county helped greatly with predicting what kind of content they would like to engage with, and as the semester went on, I felt myself being able to identify newsworthy things for the county more and more easily.

This class allowed us to see the difference diversity makes in a small, mainly white, community. When we were able to write stories that highlighted POC in Oglethorpe, the response was amazing. It showed me first-hand the importance of diversity in local news.

As a producer, particularly with social media, I tried some out-of-the-box things, like mixing in a playful tone without compromising professionalism, or using a figure of speech or emojis. In these ways I felt I was genuinely trying to think of ways to engage the audience, rather than just copying a graf.

Throughout my time at *The Echo*, I understood that I have a responsibility to our readers to publish high quality writing that is truthful,

accurate and fair. I made it a point to amplify diverse voices and perspectives.

Local journalism has taught me the importance of building connections with your sources and the people of the area you are reporting on. For this, I tried to always ensure that those I worked with felt comfortable, and felt that my reporting was transparent with them. I followed back up with sources even after the story was published to ensure they not only read my words, but felt like they could voice their opinion if need be. I never lost the truth to my facts, but I also took into account that my words affect someone else's life in some way.

Out of 21 students, six expressed interest in doing community journalism after graduation, supporting the research that these programs

provide transformative learning experiences for students, which ultimately prepare students for a stronger transition to a newsroom environment upon graduation (Salahi, 2021, p. 19).

The Echoes of Our Next Steps

Our experiment is working. We continue to listen and make adjustments but believe our reporting in Oglethorpe County has saved local journalism for this community and may lead to more talented, young journalists seeking this work. "Despite the challenges reported, 83% of participants said they do not plan to eliminate the current partnership in place" (Salahi, 2021, p. 19). We plan to go on, as part of that 83%, with a vision to mobilize younger audiences toward local news, foster diversity and depth in our community storytelling, emphasize solutions journalism to build trust, and use emerging tools to sustain and grow our nonprofit into a continuous, stable business model that in a small way contributes to the healing of local news.

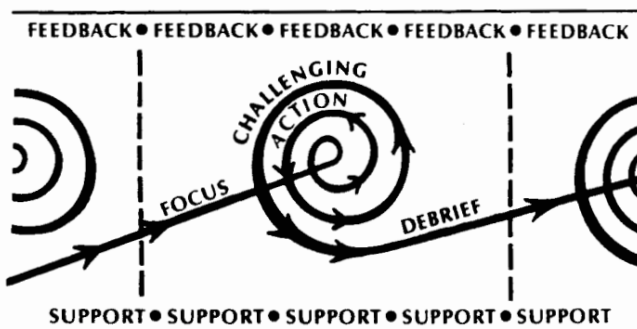


Image from L. Joplin, 1981

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