



Toward Publication: Using Work-Integrated Learning for Student Journalism to be Seen by Outside Audience

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The question of how best to train and prepare future journalists is perpetual, especially as the industry continues to morph and evolve. But one constant is the importance of practical learning (Valencia-Forrester, 2020). The journalism major often attracts students who have a confidence or interest in writing, with that emotion having been reinforced by their own previous academic experiences in journalism or the written word (Coleman et al., 2016). But being thought to be a journalistic writer and actually being one are two different things. Too often student writers are creating content for the eyes of one other person—their teacher or instructor—and the criteria for success or failure is based on that individual’s subjective standards. When students leave their academic environment to embark on a journalistic career, their writing is now judged on different criteria—namely that of the reading public—and in that measure they may fall short. Journalism classes have the opportunity to provide real-time feedback for students’ writing work with one simple addition to the curriculum: focusing the creation of class work toward publication and then using a distribution model to ensure course work has the opportunity and expectation to be seen by an outside audience.

That is the tactic taken in the beginning jour-

nalism class at a public university with a program in journalism and communication, where enrollees are introduced to publication expectations on the first day of classes. The structure is not framed around class assignments, tardy policies and reduced points for late work. Instead, it is organized around story pitches and web-focused deadlines, professionalism and publishability in public-facing online and print student media. That allows the majority of their work to be evaluated by a team of editors for the university’s award-winning independent news media. The result has been a sustained, high-level of engagement in the class experience and work product, a significant number of publications each semester, a more seamless transition to paid editor roles, and more successful placement at the highest levels of journalism enterprise.

The journalism major is a streamlined, compact program that incorporates five major (skills) classes comingled with theoretical approaches. Students, who are direct admits into the major as early as freshman year start learning core newswriting competencies, theories and skills in the first foundational course. The nature of the first course means students must not only learn the skills to carry them into the major but the accountability to establish and maintain high

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journalistic publishing standards. To accomplish this goal, the course embraces the teaching hospital theory, outlined by Knight Foundation senior adviser Eric Newton that people learn by doing (2013). Education is often maximized by learning through doing and taking it from doing journalism in class to publishing journalism in the world elevates student accomplishments even more.

Students begin their coursework by exploring news values and how to structure news articles, and by the second week they are finding and developing their own real-world news stories that have immediacy, relevance to and impact on our campus community. There are no academic prompts provided or manifested story frames for practice. Instead, their ideas are refined in class pitch meetings before they shift into the real world of news publishing. These pitches are made a faculty member and a panel of student editors, many of whom were in the class the semester before. They are then paired with a student media editor (based on the appropriate section for their article), and their editorial “team” (professor, teaching assistant, editor and reporter) help them determine and contact sourcing, develop questions, and pursue and write a publishable idea. Concurrently in class, students are practicing the skills they need to bring journalism to reality—interviewing, fact checking, AP Style, writing.

Student editors set deadlines based on their publication schedule, not a syllabus calendar. The editors work in partnership with the fledgling student journalist, providing feedback on edits at every phase of the reporting process. Students simultaneously learn to use mobile devices (phones and tablets) for reporting to ensure they have images to go with each article, can fact check and write “from the field” and have their AP Stylebook at their fingertips.

To understand the workflow, consider a story pitched on HIV testing returning to campus after a pandemic hiatus. The idea was submitted as a pitch to the professor and student-editors, who then discussed in front of the entire class the parameters for the piece, potential sourcing, and set the deadline based upon the publication schedule. While the professor worked with the student on identifying sources, developing questions, conducting interviews and story structure within the course structure, the editors worked on art and scheduling. Once the draft was ready the editor was brought back into the process to mentor the student through the writing and revision process, to publication.

The scaffolding system of having articles reviewed by a professor/editor and student editors ensures the copy is as clean and comprehensive as possible, free of significant errors and adhering to journalism’s ethical standards. Class time may be used to work in a “newsroom-style” setting, where students write with their instructor and the student-editors on hand to guide and edit as they go. That has allowed students and student-editors to develop a clear representation of work-integrated learning — practice-based, experiential education is essential to produce work-ready graduates. Work-Integrated Learning represents the integration of theory with practical knowledge and learning (Bowen, 2018). It is most often seen in the form of internships, but many journalism educators believe in incorporating practice-based learning to make students career ready (Valencia-Forrester, 2020).

The proof is in the publication. In the fall of 2021, 19 of 26 students had articles published during their first semester of journalism practice, with the earliest articles published in the fourth week. In spring 2022, 15 of 24 students were published, with the first publication in Week 5. From those two classes, five students went onto paid editing positions with student media within one semester of completing their preliminary course work. Two went on to full-time writing employment. Student engagement in class was represented by 95% attendance averaged across all class sessions and students reported they committed time in excess of class requirements to work on the articles, acknowledging the responsibilities of publication drove them toward higher quality than a class assignment would have. As one student noted on the day of publication in 2022: “I’ve never worked so hard or been prouder of work than this article. Knowing it would be read by so many people made me realize how important my words can be.”

This method is not without its challenges. It is one thing to encourage students to take risks in their writing within a class environment, but students who are published, especially in the digital space, open themselves to public scrutiny and online attacks (Dzula et al, 2020). It can also be a challenge for some students to allow for the objective analysis of their writing, especially those who may be motivated to pursue journalism within the framing of what Coleman et al. describe as “extroverted writers,” interested in self-fulfillment or “fame seekers,” driven by the expression of their own opinions (2016, p. 812). In addition, there is evidence of some attrition in journalism students

by the time publication becomes a mandatory part of their writing process during the practicum class, in which they are assigned a beat to cover throughout the course of a semester. As the excitement of publication wears off, some become overwhelmed by the requirements of journalistic writing and choose a different path. This, too, is a worthwhile learning process, as it helps them recognize the career requirements before they commit their entire academic career to this pursuit.

While other universities have similar publication aspirations for student journalists, this model is unique in the relationship building between student-editors and journalism students at the beginning of their publication journey. Their coaching and evaluations provide a peer-to-peer network that allows for greater accountability in and understanding of the publication process, as each step of the assignment transcends the idea that the professor is the most important audience. It replaces it with the actual reading audience, which can now number in the thousands and includes global engagement.

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