



Journalism Course Builds Trust, Transferable Skills in Non-Majors

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The eye roll. The heavy sigh. The “Why do I have to do this?” questions, whether stated or implied. Sadly, these are often the hallmarks of students in the journalism classroom who do not plan to pursue careers as professional journalists. Of course these attitudes aren’t particular to journalism, but they can be exacerbated by a slate of activities in a typical media writing course that are distinct from most other college classes and inherently uncomfortable for many students, from conducting in-person interviews to stripping all traces of opinion from their writing. After more than a dozen semesters of teaching a course in journalistic writing dominated by non-majors, I have had ample experience with this phenomenon. In this article, I employ a case study approach to explore benefits of and strategies for engaging non-majors in the journalism classroom.

A case study investigates a particular “unit of human activity embedded in the real world,” using a variety of available evidence that is then “abstracted and collated” (Gillham, 2000, 1) so that the findings can be applied to similar contexts. The William Peace University media writing course (COM 230) provides an apt case study from which to draw general lessons for teaching non-journalists. It is required for all students majoring in communication, most of whom are specializing in public relations or visual communication.

It also fulfills the requirement for a writing major that crosses over with the English department, drawing a number of students who are adept at academic writing but disinterested in journalism. The course also fulfills a general education requirement, and is popular with students in marketing, theater, business, and other majors.

Drawing from my own observations of the many non-major students in the course as well as their own words in reflection activities, course evaluations and other sources, I argue in this article that immersing students who will never be journalists in the act of creating journalistic content has immense value both to the students themselves and society at large. I also offer techniques to engage non-majors in the journalism classroom that have proven successful in my courses.

Insult to Opportunity

As a former full-time print and current freelance journalist, I started out a bit defensive of the enterprise that has been so central to my life and career. I found myself responding to testy complaints about news writing style with soapbox speeches about democracy and the Fourth Estate. While future journalists might grouse about some of the particulars of news writing, non-majors seemed to bring into doubt the value of

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journalism in general, an insult that hits close to home in an era in which “the boundaries of what journalism is and what it is not are becoming increasingly indistinct,” particularly among young people (Wunderlich, et al., 2022).

In fact, I observed that many of my students came into the class without a clear understanding of what distinguishes journalistic content from other types of information. When asked, for instance, to share a recent news story, I would be dismayed when students would choose information from advocacy organizations or blogs rather than traditional news sources.

Over time, however, I came to see this fundamental misunderstanding of journalism as a unique opportunity. These non-journalists were going to do the work of journalists for a semester, including learning to use primary sources, interviewing, writing an inverted pyramid story and using AP Style. Non-journalists would likely not use these exact skills in the future, but immersing students in these practices can help them to distinguish between information that is produced according to the journalistic standards from the vast array of information sources that do not employ such standards. The complex guidelines and practices that were the source of so many student complaints, after all, are key tools in the vast effort made every day on the part of journalists across the world to earn the trust of their audiences. If they must learn the rules, they should also bring from the experience a deeper understanding of what journalism is, how it functions, and why it is important. Rather than an insult, I saw an opportunity to move my students to become part of the paltry 36% of Americans that Gallup has found trust the news media (Brenan, 2021). In a process of trial and error, I developed a number of approaches that I found helped to increase students’ understanding of the field of journalism: focusing on the purpose of writing and reporting guidelines, creating realistic reporting situations, and emphasizing transferable skills.

Focus, and Reflect On, the Why

The first habit I erased as I changed my orientation was using any variation of the sentence, “That’s just the rule.” In journalism, every rule has a purpose, and while students may remember some of the rules long enough for a test or assignment, I sought to instill in them an indelible sense of why these rules exist, most often to enhance the credibility of the writer. Why do we have to attribute information to sour-

es so regularly? So that the reader can evaluate the quality of the information. Why do we use AP style? Because consistency also leads to credibility. Infusing every lesson with these big-picture rationales, I found, made an impression on students. I often assign reflection activities, which research has shown is helpful for “interpreting and internalizing academic activity” (Sven Veine, et al., 2020). In these reflections, students are asked to consider the work of journalists, and their responses often demonstrate that they had internalized journalistic ideals through the process of adhering to professional standards. “This class has changed how I view media writing and news in general,” one student wrote, “as you can take in what they’re trying to say in a different, more analytical, way” (WPU). A number of responses showed a clear understanding of the importance of sourcing and attribution, including this one:

I know how news stories are produced and all the steps that should be taken before publishing a story and why. Reporters have to make sure that they get all the facts and look at it from multiple perspectives before coming to a conclusion and reporting on it. Readers will need to know where you got that information to evaluate it (WPU).

While AP style may seem to represent the epitome of rule-driven instruction, I found that studying AP style in particular offered opportunities to explore how and why our use of language changes over time. Recent changes related to the “race-related coverage” and “gender and sexuality” sections of the AP Stylebook (2020) prompted lengthy discussions of how our societal understanding of these identities has changed, and how the usage of fair and accurate terminology enhances the credibility of journalists. Reflecting on these discussions, one student wrote,

It is appropriate to identify the source by their race or ethnicity only when it helps build the story and the topic being discussed, mainly because if a journalist were to do that on a story where it doesn’t seem relevant, readers could just disregard what the person said or even dismiss the article entirely (WPU).

Another student observed the following related to style rules for gender neutral language:

It is important because there are so many different ways that people identify as now, and their inclusion to the discussion of any type of news is important to society, as we value every-

one's opinion (WPU).

College students clearly have multiple opportunities to learn strategies for evaluating information during classes in multiple disciplines. However, I have found that the act of creating journalistic content that adheres to professional standards and guidelines tends to help students appreciate and internalize the "rules" of creating reputable informational content from the perspective of the creator. It stands to reason that participating in the journalistic process would facilitate learning in a similar way to other "learning by doing" strategies that have been shown to be more effective than passive learning methods (Stull et al.). This deeper understanding of the steps journalists take to maintain credibility will likely carry forth into students' future habits as information consumers.

Make it Real

Being a journalist is frustrating. People don't call you back or cancel interviews. The distrust in the news media referenced above manifests itself in the "people on the street" who are increasingly leery of sharing their perspectives. Ethical dilemmas crop up every day, and journalists must constantly question if they are including all relevant viewpoints and presenting the news fairly and accurately. From the outside, it may be easy to direct simplistic questions at the news media, like "Why don't they just tell the truth?" Immersing students in the process of creating journalistic products, however, adds complexity to their understanding of how news products are produced, fosters empathy with news media professionals, and helps students understand today's challenging media environment.

Creating class activities that involve "real" reporting including live interviews, press conferences and observation instead of canned exercises forces students to experience the reporting process – an immersion that brought about a variety of insights in student reflections. One type of response focused on the surprising complexity of the reporting process. "I learned the deep process of writing news articles by writing my story," one student wrote in a reflection question after writing two news stories. "Every time I look at a news article I can break it down into different sections and I now know what makes a good news article, and the components of it." Another reflection focused on the shifting nature of information: "I learned that the news media gains a lot more information than what they actually put in their stories

and that their stories could take a completely different take if they used other information that they learned." Another student observed that, "Misleading information and biased perspectives are everywhere, and you need to find multiple sources to rule out what is real and what isn't."

Asked to reflect on the work of journalists, other students focused on the lack of trust in media, and the difficult working environment for journalists: "Journalists can face challenges such as working with incomplete information, having to meet tight deadlines, or working in tense situations," one student wrote. Another noted that "your teacher might give you a bad grade, but the public will tear you apart." Other responses revealed students' understanding of the challenging and competitive media environment journalists work in an era of information overload and the 24-hour news cycle. "One of the most challenging things faced by journalists is producing the news in an ever-changing world," one student wrote. "There are so many people who believe reporting is becoming obsolete, and rely too heavily on citizen journalism." Another noted that journalists have "a constant deadline adding pressure to their workload which can cause them to potentially miss important facts."

In all, student reflections showed that working on "real" stories gave them a sense that presenting a factual account of any event or issue is not a simple task. It involves wading through false or misleading information and making difficult decisions about which information to include and prioritize, often under intense deadline pressure. Students also got a glimpse of how the current media environment forces journalists to compete for the attention of readers against information sources that likely are not adhering to the same standards.

Skills That Transfer

Creating better news consumers benefits both students and society at large. Students can also reap personal benefits from a news writing course that are applicable in other classes and a variety of careers. While students may resent the imposition of new writing rules and restrictions, I emphasize that the style of writing one employs is always dependent on the audience and intended purpose of the piece being written; while they are accustomed to academic writing, it is but one of many possible formats, and learning to adapt to various types of writing only strengthens their skills and versatility as writers.

In addition, I emphasize that journalistic writing has particular skills to teach, including valuing brevity and effectively using direct quotations, that can be helpful in a variety of writing tasks. Student reflections bear out their understanding of the skills that they will bring to their other classes and future careers. Here's a comment from a LinkedIn post by a former media writing student and English major who went on to write for the campus newspaper and now works as an SEO specialist: "If you're looking for ways to tighten up your writing/content, I suggest reading up on journalistic writing principles. Writing for my college's student paper changed how I looked at storytelling" (Timper, 2022). Another student wrote in a course evaluation that the class "has helped me learn a lot about how the short and to the point nature of writing for news can be a huge help when trying to get a point across... Journalistic writing will help improve my essays and other types of writing in the future."

Journalism classes include a number of activities that are focused on transferable skills, including the examination of ethical and First Amendment issues that promote critical thinking skills. Yet often the task of journalistic writing can feel to students like a skill that bears little promise for future use. By emphasizing that journalistic writing also bears helpful lessons for other communication tasks, students both engage further in the process and approach their learning in a way that helps them transfer these skills to future tasks outside of journalism.

Conclusion

I have found that the task of teaching journalistic reporting and writing to students whose interests lie elsewhere benefitted from reframing my focus as an instructor. Instead of focusing on specific skills and standards as crucial to their future careers, as I might for journalism students, I found success by teaching students who may not value journalism as an enterprise why those standards matter, and how they can employ that knowledge to become more competent consumers of information and, ideally, ones that trust in the news media over less credible sources. Future journalists most often come into my class with an understanding of why journalism matters; teaching students who may not have otherwise come to this understanding is perhaps even more rewarding.

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