

Instructional Design for the Future of Undergraduate Journalism Education

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ABSTRACT

In the face of communication changes brought on by technology, journalism curriculum needs restructuring while staying true to its core values. Using an instructional design framework, and a case study, this paper proposes a journalism education based on Esser's spheres of influence. Current practices and principles are discussed. A literature review and emerging trends shape the proposed curriculum clusters: the business and profession of journalism, communication, and community/society.

Keywords: Accreditation, Case Study, Communication, Curriculum, Education, Instructional Design, Society, Sphere of Influence, Standards

INTRODUCTION

According to the Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communications (2009),

"The mission of journalism and mass communications professions in a democratic society is to inform, to enlighten and to champion freedom of speech and press. These professions seek to enable people to fulfill their responsibilities as citizens who mean to govern themselves. They seek to help people protect, pursue and promote their rights and interests in their personal lives and in their work in public and philanthropic service, in commerce and industry, and in the professions." (p. 1)

Because the world has changed significantly, the extent and quality of information have expanded exponentially, and the communication channels themselves have transformed in recent decades, journalism – and the education of journalists -- need to factor in these changes. Nevertheless, the core function and values of journalism seem more or less constant. Thus, in designing a new undergraduate journalism program, journalism educators need to find that balance between the universal enduring nature of the profession and the changing environment in which journalists practice.

When determining the quality of a journalism education program, the Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communications (ACEJMC) applies nine standards: mission and governance, curriculum and instruction, diversity and inclusiveness,

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faculty, scholarship, student services, resources, service, and assessment. Seamon (2010) noted the limitations of ACEJMC's standards in that some aspects, particularly diversity, seem to give undue weight to a program. He pinpointed curriculum as a weak part of the standards. Because the content of a journalism program is a core factor, and should reflect the interplay between professional and the environment in which they work, this paper will focus on this aspect of journalism education design. To this end, the curriculum needs to address communication skills, the function of the profession, and the interaction with the community.

DESIGNING PRINCIPLES

Designing an undergraduate journalism education program should be a thoughtful and informed process. Instructional design is a systematic process of developing educational programs. This approach aligns analysis, design, and development, and assessment in an iterative and reflective manner (Reiser & Dempsey, 2007). Particularly since journalism should address both theory and practice, instructional design is an appropriate model to use.

The first step in designing the program is conducting a needs assessment of the stakeholders: practicing professionals, journalism educators, educational administrators, current and former students, relevant professional organizations, and the citizenry. Current journalism education accreditation standards should also be consulted, especially since they represent the thinking of a broad spectrum of professionals. The needs assessment uncovers the gap between the current and desired condition, and hopefully suggests some ways to bridge that gap. Needs assessments identify the bases of needs, interests, and values; both cognitive and affective priorities need to be ascertained and prioritized. This paper uses a case study to show a representative current journalism education program, and then will draw upon the current literature to identify needs that are not currently being addressed in journalism education.

The needs assessment findings are then used to develop the journalism education goals and objectives. Assessments should also be developed at the start to determine how effective the program will be. Only then can the curriculum itself, the content, be designed.

Although this paper does not focus on the rest of the instructional design, it should be noted that several factors must be considered in the implementation of any educational program. Content needs to be communicated, so faculty need to locate and use available and cost-effective resources; in some cases, they might need to create them. In this part of the design process, the journalism program is largely limited by the institution's capacity and the community's resources. The instruction itself has to take into consideration issues of sequencing, timing, staffing, facilities as well as instructional strategies. All of these decisions lie within the instructional and larger educational system.

The following case study shows how a representative program was designed, and will exemplify current journalism education curriculum.

Case Study: California State University Long Beach

The closest university to the author that has an undergraduate journalism education program is California State University Long Beach (CSULB). It was reviewed by the ACEJMC and the university in 2009-2010, so it serves as a useful example of current program design and implementation. It also reflects the need for aligning to national standards in order to assure quality control and reflect professional practice.

The department drew upon the experiences of their own faculty and the ACEJMC professional values and competencies in their 2009 needs assessment. They acknowledged that "in this fast-changing media environment, new issues have emerged that have encouraged us to examine and re-examine issues of how best to train our students for success in an increasingly interconnected media atmosphere" (p. 16).

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