Virtual International Collaboration as a Tool for Teaching Online Journalism at the University Level: A Pedagogical Proposal

Ainara Larrondo-Ureta
University of the Basque Country, Spain

Simón Peña-Fernández
University of the Basque Country, Spain

* Research group specialising in university-level online journalism training, University of the Basque Country (KZBerri-Gureiker Group)

Abstract

This paper examines teaching approaches applied during the academic years 2017–2018 and 2018–2019 in Online Newswriting, a course forming part of the core undergraduate journalism curriculum at UPV/EHU. At the moment they were introduced in conjunction with the rollout of the EHEA, this course and others focusing on online communications and multimedia skills represented an innovative leap forward that greatly enriched the school's undergraduate journalism curriculum. The cutting-edge nature of these courses nevertheless supposed the need to review and update them on a regular basis to ensure they kept pace with the ongoing evolution of sector technology and practices.

Keywords: journalism, teaching approaches, online newswriting, university level.

1. Teaching online journalism at the university level

Over the past few decades, educators in every discipline have increasingly focused on the potential of new technologies in general and web-based communications tools in particular, striving to bring their curricula up to date by making newly available means of expression such as blogs, websites and social media platforms an integral part of the teaching-learning process. Given communications and news enterprises' reliance on cutting edge technology and their ongoing quest to consolidate professional practices related to web-based communications, university communication and journalism programmes are working particularly hard to place a stronger emphasis on online content production. Nevertheless, efforts to prepare students to practice emergent forms of journalism have centred mainly on the multimedia and interactive aspects of online media (Deuze, 2001) rather than the "soft" skills that underpin content production in a media-convergent world (Bor, 2014).

Although it has been widely acknowledged that communications students should acquire core knowledge and skills regardless of the area of the media sector in which they will eventually be employed, over the past two decades an increasing number of scholars have underscored the need to adapt the pedagogical approaches currently being applied to online journalism (Scott, 2002; Kraeplin & Criado, 2005; Castañeda, Larrondo & Peña, 2017). This is not surprising given the impact the continual adaptation and innovation the sector has undergone during this period has had on the types of skills journalists are expected to bring to the job, which now include the ability to coordinate their activities with fellow journalists and external partners – an issue of particular importance in fields such as data

journalism. Equally crucial is ensuring that students have an adequate grasp of the procedures, tools and ethics applicable to media organisations' interactions with their audiences and develop the flexible mindset multimedia content production and transmedia event coverage requires.

Educators who have begun to revamp their approaches to teaching communications and journalism on the basis of these observations are now covering techniques employed in multimedia production and areas such as social media in which audiences play a fundamental role in the distribution, viralization and 'prosumer' production of content. This strategy squares with forecasts that convergent media (multimedia, transmedia, cross-media, etc.), social journalism and journalism 2.0 will continue to dictate and shape many aspects of university-level journalism curricula over the next few decades (Bhuiyan, 2010; Cochrane, 2014; Salaverría, 2011).

This paper aims to contribute to the literature generated to date on this subject by means of an analysis of teaching methods presently being employed in a journalism course designed to keep pace with current and future trends in this field. Three particular aspects of the course in question have been examined: the implementation of social media-related teaching tools that foster group cooperation and teamwork and acelerate students' mastery of content production techniques, the use of 'Internationalisation at Home' (IaH) teaching resources that help students develop a range of useful transferable skills and the integration of advanced multimedia newswriting tools into course structures.

2. Building an innovative model for teaching online newswriting

The overall objective of this paper is to identify effective strategies for updating and revitalising online journalism courses added to university communications curricula following the creation of European Higher Education Area (EHEA) in 2010. More specifically, it will examine the implementation and outcomes of the second phase of a collaboration between researchers in various countries responsible for teaching this subject that was structured to allow students from five universities located in three different countries to interact and work together as virtual international teams on a series of multimedia and transmedia journalism assignments. Strategies pursued during phase one of this project were evaluated by means of ethnographic observation of classroom activity and student and faculty surveys to determine which best facilitated students' development of online newswriting, content production and teamworking skills, and the results of this analysis were used to fine-tune methods implemented in the second phase.

This paper examines teaching approaches applied during the academic years 2017–2018 and 2018–2019 in Online Newswriting, a course forming part of the core undergraduate journalism curriculum at UPV/EHU. At the moment they were introduced in conjunction with the rollout of the EHEA, this course and others focusing on online communications and multimedia skills represented an innovative leap forward that greatly enriched the school's undergraduate journalism curriculum. The cutting-edge nature of these courses nevertheless supposed the need to review and update them on a regular basis to ensure they kept pace with the ongoing evolution of sector technology and practices.

In this light, research undertaken at UPV/EHU in this area offers insight into how teaching innovation at the curricular level can help universities meet the ongoing challenge of preparing undergraduate students to pursue successful professional careers in online social communication. The analysis that follows has been based on the findings of empirical studies conducted over the past five years by KZBerri, a University of the Basque Country-based research group focused on teaching innovation in cyberjournalism at the undergraduate level. All six of the professors pertaining to this group teach Online Newswriting, a course that forms part of the core curriculum of UPV/EHU's undergraduate journalism, audiovisual communication and advertising and public relation degree programmes, or other

undergraduate or postgraduate courses of a similar nature. As Online Writing has been structured as a required course in all three undergraduate communications programmes the university offers, all undergraduate students pursuing degrees in these disciplines receive training in this area. In terms of related competences, students are expected by the end of the course to be able to 'plan and produce messages incorporating the differentiating characteristics of the language of cyberjournalism (hyper-textuality, multimediality and interactivity) and the conventions, principles and narrative functions of the genres associated with online journalism'.

Hands-on assignments for this course include the task of setting up and maintaining a blog showcasing the digital news stories, multimedia features and other types of online content students have created using tools such as Storify, Dipity, Meograph, Thinglink, Wix, Piktochart, Tumblr, Story Maps and Infogram. Students are also expected to disseminate their class work via social media plat-forms. All of these activities are carried out by groups of between four and five students to ensure that everyone taking the course develops teamworking skills. The teaching innovation project described in this paper has been implemented in two distinct phases: 'Cooperative Learning in Online Newswriting through Web 2.0: a Brazilian–Basque Experience', a collaboration between UPV/EHU and a university located in Brazil that ran from February 2017 through December 2018 and 'Virtual Collaborative Lear-ning in Online Newswriting: a Brazilian–Portuguese–Basque Experience', an endeavour of broader geographic scope involving the UPV/EHU, two universities in Brazil and a further two universities loca-ted in Portugal that began in February 2018 and is scheduled to conclude in December 2019.

The first phase focused on virtual trans-Atlantic interaction between UPV/EHU communica-tions students and counterparts enrolled in *Laboratório de Ciberjornalismo I* (Cyberjournalism Lab I), a course taught at the Federal University of Mato Grosso do Sul in Brazil by collaborating professor Gerson Luiz Martins. During this period, students enrolled in online journalism classes at the two uni-versities maintained a video and textual dialogue about instructions, feedback and advice they received related to their respective multimedia content projects and assignments. This initiative added a new dimension to the learning process by providing two types of classroom experience (one face-to-face and local and another virtual and international) and allowed the twenty students involved to develop common competences associated with the multimedia languages of the Basque Country and Brazil. Collaborative learning projects incorporating internationalisation at home strategies are worth explo-ring given the possibility they offer to add an international component to courses taken by students unable to pursue study abroad programmes (Kurthen, 2008). To better assess the utility of this kind of approach, students participating in this phase of the project were surveyed about their experience.

Responses to this survey revealed that certain interaction aspects of courses should be rethou-ght and strengthened. Students needed more real-time, online trans-Atlantic contact, language barriers needed to be dealt with and strategies for boosting student engagement at all institutions needed to be devised. On the basis of participating teachers' feedback to students in the classroom and the views they expressed during a November 29, 2017 workshop organised to give them an opportunity to com-pare first phase outcomes, the research groups involved in the project decided to build upon lessons learnt by extending their collaboration through the academic year 2018–2019, retaining the structures and methods that had worked satisfactorily the first time around and redesigning the aspects that had fallen short. As cyberjournalism is considered to be a major driver of innovation at every level of the discipline from professional practice to research and pedagogy, the KZberri group was highly interested in exploring teaching and learning processes that had a strong internationalisation at home component this area.

In consideration of the pace at which practices such as telework in (cyber)journalism and the implementation of interactive tools such as Doodle and Dropbox in collaborative teamwork are taking

hold, KZberri researchers also felt that the next round cyberjournalism courses being planned for phase two needed to place a focus on high-demand, value-added skills such as the ability to engage in teamwork and collaborate with others online. Taking these factors into account in planning the second phase of the project, the group renewed its commitment to initial objectives such as accelerating the acquisition of competences established for Online Newswriting by means of hands-on methods designed to help students gain a better grasp of the processes involved in the production of in-depth multimedia reports, providing teaching-learning environments that mirrored professional environments as closely as possible and fostering UPV/EHU students' interest in the internationalisation at home concept while working hand-in-hand with project teams in other countries to resolve problems identified during the analysis conducted at the end of phase one and broaden the scope of the project going forward. On the basis of group consensus:

1. Students have continued to be divided into work groups that simulate professional production teams as closely as possible but groups are now composed of a mix of students from the Federal University of Mato Grosso do Sul, the UPV/EHU and three other schools recently incorporated into the project – the Universities of Oporto and Covilha in Portugal and the Federal University of Piauí in Brazil. These schools were selected on the basis of their ability to fulfil criteria established for project collaboration, which were the inclusion in their first-semester communications curricula of a course similar to Online Newswriting in terms of content and objectives and the availability of interested faculty members recognised for their knowledge of the theoretical and practical aspects of online journalism, contributions to existing literature on the subject and active participation in group activities, teaching innovation labs and the organisation of international conferences.

2. Students continue to carry out practical exercises with a strong teaching innovation component. Five-member groups comprised of one student from each of the collaborating universities working under the supervision of a faculty member are expected to collectively plan, design and produce an in-depth, multimedia news story on a theme of interest to students at all five locations and a website devoted exclusively to this project. This assignment has been structured to give students the opportunity students to put into practice the full range of skills and techniques they are required to master during the course, from photographic and audiovisual production and editing and news, feature and opinion writing to web design. Given that student work groups are expected to function as much like professional newsroom teams as possible, one member of each group has been assigned the role of editor/coordinator/spokesperson for that unit, taking responsibility for the flow of internal information as well as external communications with classmates and the teacher leading the course.

3. English has been designated the common language for all courses involved to foster fluid communication between students and further underscore the internationalisation at home concept.

4. Given its utility, cooperation and feedback between students from different universities continue to be encouraged and facilitated with greater frequency and on a greater scale than they were during phase one. Both are now thoroughly embedded into the teaching innovation process from start to finish as is feedback generated during assessment activities and comments shared via email or posted on social media sites. Each group is required to maintain a profile page on Facebook and use another sharing tool such as Google Drive to boost activity in these areas.

5. To take this concept further, second phase students are also expected to engage in face-to-face classroom interaction with classmates as well as maintain routine virtual contact with members of their working groups enrolled at other universities. To this end, all members of each work group are required to make a detailed mid-term class presentation during which they describe the topic of the news story his or her unit is producing, technical aspects of their projects related to structure, division into sections and content and any major challenges they have faced. These sessions (scheduled

to take place in late November during the 2017–2018 academic year) are meant to allow students to share their works-in-progress with others and to encourage them to exchange ideas and critique each other's work.

   6. Lastly, students continue to be involved in activities that foster reflection and critical debate in which both they and their professors play an active role and attend events organised by their universities such as focused round table discussions forming part of international conferences held on their campuses and departmental seminars and workshops open to the entire student body.

3. Final remarks

Although this paper may focus on issues and activities related to a specific course and teaching situation, it nevertheless provides insight relevant to the ongoing debate regarding the challenges involved in teaching media and journalism today and the opportunities available to educators to foster innovation. As such, it serves as a point of departure for reflections on the suitability of approaches to teaching journalism and designing journalism curricula grounded on the assumption that fostering the development of skills that complement competences established for a given course is a worthwhile endeavour that enriches the teaching-learning process and broadens the scope of journalism training in a positive way.

   It is important to determine the extent to which classroom innovations of this nature make students active agents and protagonists on their individual learning processes, keeping in mind that as digital natives, the young people filling journalism classrooms today have been avid users of digital technology since early childhood. Projects such as the one described in this paper make it clear that a diversity of input and perspective, be it local, national or international in scope, boosts the efficiency of student work groups.

References

Bhuiyan, S. I. (2010). Teaching media convergence and its challenges. *Asia Pacific Media Educator*, *20*.

Bor, S. E. (2014). Teaching social media journalism: Challenges and opportunities for future curriculum design. *Journalism & Mass Communication Educator*, *69*, 243–255

Castañeda, L. (2003). Teaching convergence, *Online Journalism* Review March 6, 2003. Retrieved from: http://www.ojr.org/ojr/education/1046983385.php

Cochrane, Th. (2014). Critical success factors for transforming pedagogy with mobile web 2.0. *British Journal of Educational Technology*, *45*(1), 65–82.

Deuze, M. (2001). Educating 'New' Journalists: Challenges to the Curriculum, *Journalism & Mass Communication Educator 56*, 4–17.

Kraeplin, C., & Criado, C. A. (2005). Building a Case for Convergence Journalism Curriculum. *Journalism & Mass Education Monographs*, *8*(3), 221–262.

Kurthen, H. (2008). "Transnational Online Student Collaboration: Does it work?" In Dietz, B.E.; Ritchey, L.H. (Eds). *Scaffolding for Student Success in Learning: Best practices in using instruction strategies*, 202–210. Washington, DC: American Sociological Association.

Larrondo, A., & Peña, S. (2017). Keeping pace with journalism training in the age of social media and convergence. How worthwhile is it to teach online skills? *Journalism*, preprint, December 4 2017

Salaverría, R. (2011). Online journalism meets the university: ideas for teaching and research. In *Brazilian Journalism Research*, 7(2).

Scott Sheerin, M. (2002). Media convergence: how are we preparing students of journalism and mass communication to deal with it. Paper presented at the Dynamics of Convergent Media conference, University of South Carolina.