

Sharpening The Factual Edge:

teaching journalism today

Eamonn O’Neill describes the challenges of teaching and doing journalism while emphasising journalism’s shared territory with Creative Writing.



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There’s an old Chinese proverb which I have pinned in my home-office which says: ‘Tell me and I will forget. Show me and I may remember. Involve me and I will remember.’

This is one of my favourite quotes from many I’ve collected over the past 20 years as a professional journalist. Yes, it might be clichéd, but for me personally it nails down the essence of what teaching journalism in the Department of English Studies at the University of Strathclyde in Glasgow is all about.

Not everyone believes journalism can or should be ‘taught’ of course. Once upon a time becoming a journalist in the UK was a predictable process where you needed to know someone to get your foot in the door, be willing to work your way up the ladder from local newspapers, navigate a class system between tabloids and broadsheets and learn your trade by trial and error and hope to God you didn’t get sued. And you’d better be a man too, unless you wanted to spend four decades writing pieces on fashion and babies for the ‘women’s’ page.

Thankfully, things have changed quite a bit.

Universities up and down the UK now offer a range of degrees, both undergraduate and postgraduate, which aren’t just about training for the day-to-day job, but provide serious education for students wanting to enter the world of journalism. Not all journalism is taught within English departments, but at Strathclyde it is. We now offer a respected undergraduate degree as part of our innovative Journalism & Creative Writing programme and a range of postgraduate courses in everything from straightforward Journalism, to International Journalism and also Investigative Journalism.

One of the long-acknowledged key challenges of offering journalism degrees at any level is simply getting the mix right between the core practical elements of courses and the wider academic content. It’s a delicate mix that’s easy to get wrong and hard to get right. If a course relies too heavily on practical work, it tips into the territory of being a vocational

training course – not journalism education. However, if too much theory is offered, then it becomes an academic education in media studies or communications – again not journalism education.

The USA has led the way over the past 40 years in bringing journalism into university curriculums. In part, this was down to the profile of its unique marketplace and the CVs of its practitioners. From the 1960s onwards, it became expected for even local journalists to have gained a college or university degree before entering the business in America. For complex reasons, the story in the UK has been different. Lucrative and exciting jobs still exist in the tabloid sector, for example, where less importance is attached to higher degrees. Local newspapers, to mention another example, have often been keener on comprehensively covering official sources of news (e.g. courts, police, local councils) and therefore supporting training which emphasised knowing the rules and laws, as opposed to aggressively unearthing hidden facts or challenging

'official' versions of events. But things have evolved, and a broadly similar pattern to what occurred in the USA is – I believe – starting to emerge in the UK higher education sector.

Compared to previous decades, more and more UK journalists now have some form of higher education. This is no bad thing considering how highly educated and vastly experienced even the average local government public relations chief-cum-spin-doctor can be these days.

Additionally, it should be borne in mind that there are more potential readers and viewers attending university than ever before, which arguably means everyone has to raise their game in terms of offering more engaging, challenging, original and relevant journalistic content. This has had a ripple effect in universities, since it seems (on anecdotal evidence I've gathered) that more lecturers engaged in teaching journalism have themselves been educated to at least undergraduate level and, more often than not, Masters Level and beyond. This was not always the case and, it should be recognised, some chips on shoulders still exist among the industry's dinosaurs who simply wish to turn the clock back to a golden age which never existed and who are absurdly suspicious of well-educated journalists – and academic colleagues – and any courses taught by them on any campus in any country. These are the same people who would brag about hiring the finest lawyers for any legal problems or fight to gain access to the most skilled surgeon if they needed a bypass, yet they treat the same pursuit of excellence in journalism education with a contradictory mix of bewilderment and contempt.

In fact, it seems to me, journalism, like law and medicine, seems to work best for students when cutting-edge academic theory is mixed and linked to robust and enjoyable practical methods of teaching and professional delivery. Individuals like me – a mix of journalist and academic – also must take a lead in conveying to journalists the value of academic contributions to ongoing debates in journalism, media and communications sectors. At Strathclyde I am lucky to work in a freewheeling and dynamic environment where widely respected colleagues address the students' needs to understand the wider global media context in which they might find

themselves working one day. Exposure to that level of debate, thinking, analysis and contextualising will help the students in their careers and, for the time being, also give me perspective on what I do. Being in an English department also is a gift for me, since I work alongside lecturers who research and teach on a stimulating array of themes connected to my work (e.g. I am currently discussing the journalism value and content of Alan Clark's infamous political diaries with a colleague, Dr Sarah

longer articles which encourage them to develop their news gathering, interview skills and feature-writing techniques. The approaches they've picked up in Creative Writing classes – plotting, use of dialogue, characterisation and so on – are welcome in the factual world I inhabit and teach. I see no conflict between the pedagogical basis of these paths and actively encourage students to think in terms of style, lyricism and individuality when writing their journalism. The great

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Edwards, who teaches and researches forms of life writing). The Strathclyde course itself was conceived to reflect the link which exists between the disciplines of creative writing and journalism. As such, it is quite modern in its recognition of the current popularity of long-form non-fiction narrative articles, the kind which are often transformed by scriptwriters into 'Based on a True Story' movie magic. In such contexts it is important for would-be journalists, like would-be fiction writers, to learn solid characterisation, dramatic tension, plot pacing and so on.

At first this combination of Journalism and Creative Writing might seem like a marriage of opposites. In reality, it's highly attractive to both teachers and students currently applying for the course. More than ever, as online platforms offer more ways to research and deliver journalism, it's important that technology doesn't overwhelm the content: the means cannot be allowed to ever become the message. At Strathclyde, Creative Writing students have access to published poets, novelists, playwrights and biographers. The classic requirements of all good fictional works – story, plot, character, narrative arc and so on – are imparted by staff that have done it and are doing it. The same is true on the journalism side of the degree, and on a good day the opposite sides of the coin complement and reinforce the other, with the golden thread being high-quality writing.

Journalism students are assessed through continuous assessment pieces which are a mix of traditional reporting exercises (e.g. court reporting) and

journalists referred to on this course – like Hemingway and Orwell – only gained power in their non-fiction writing by displaying a degree of controlled swagger in their prose. The core rule I derive from such examples is that all writing must be factually verifiable and conform to basic industry standards – apart from that, students are positively encouraged to be themselves and develop their own styles.

In the classes I teach, I always mix both the practical and the theoretical. I've always felt it was important for students to know why they are learning something, as much as showing them how to do it. This is not as easy as it sounds. For example, the apparently tedious task of news gathering, which might involve shorthand or the transcription of taped notes, plus retaining additional notes from calls, interviews or e-mails, is often something less-organised students aren't too keen on. Introducing a real-life example however, where such notes were required as evidence in a murder case or where a journalist was ordered to reveal a source by a court, underlines the importance of best professional practice. More often than not, this is done by showing them letters from lawyers I have tangled with during nasty investigative cases. Clearly, for reasons I don't want to guess at, the prospect of me in the dock manages to awaken even the sleepest of students previously unimpressed by the thorny hedgerows of media law.

At first I was wary of using such case studies I'd worked on, since if it's done thoughtlessly and with minimum effort it looks like teaching-by-anecdote and

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even ego-led practice. But with some perspective, critical analysis and, most importantly of all, using serious and thoughtful feedback from students themselves, it is possible to use my own – and others' I'm familiar with – case studies to hook students from day one and make them realise how important it is to think beyond the walls of the lecture theatre.

Additionally, all undergraduate and postgraduate students are welcomed to the 'Innocence Project' I recently launched. These campus-based initiatives – which originally started in the USA – allow students to work on real cases where miscarriages of justice have allegedly occurred. They deal with real documents, forensic reports and witness statements. It's an area I know well from my professional investigative work in print and broadcast. The goal for us at Strathclyde is to produce compelling journalism and catapult the cases back into the appeal courts.

There are, inevitably, some limitations in the case study approach. For one thing, not all case studies lend themselves to

profile in the industry while still being a full-time lecturer. I've sometimes found this exhausting but also worthwhile, as there are real rewards in the classroom where I can put some of my minor successes – and many more failures – to good use. The students relish being taught by someone who they can read, hear and see is still actively trying to practise what's being preached. The case studies open up the industry to them and make it feel accessible and relevant. If I show an example where I fall flat on my face, so be it: students learn from my mistakes and it helps them to avoid repeating them.

One area I have found some modest professional success in is investigative journalism, which is commonly regarded as one of the toughest, but also most satisfying, fields to work in. It's also impossible to teach this, I believe, without having done it and still be doing it. Being able to teach a class which begins with the finished article then, piece by piece, reverse engineer it, dismantling it systematically, and revealing how each part came about, is my most enjoyable

Dispatches and a host of other sources. I'm fortunate enough to know many practitioners as colleagues or friends, and encourage my students to read their work and then contact the authors at their private e-mail addresses (which I've arranged beforehand) with questions as part of their coursework. In this way I am genuinely trying to break down walls, help students meet the best in the business and begin to map out what's creatively possible in their careers and professions.

Consequently, it's no surprise to me that student journalists become engaged and proactive at a faster rate if they feel really involved in the case they're studying. In recent years I've managed groups of up to 50 in one class, working on miscarriage of justice cases (including the Jill Dando murder) and handling real, never-before-made-public documents and case papers. Their progress was startling and heartening: legal, social, psychological and forensic issues were confronted, naturally, since they soon popped up in the papers being handled. The legal challenges of publishing also reveal themselves in short order and students went on their own journeys of discovery and learning as they sought, fought and argued with lawyers about the rights and wrongs of what they wanted to write about. By using the case study method, curriculum topics were covered in half the time spent on traditional close study of texts. I appreciate that case study teaching – whether one's own or borrowed from others – might not work for everyone and, in fact, I still use textbooks too – there are many excellent ones. But I do genuinely believe that building in some element of the case study approach will yield results in the class and in practice.

Journalism is going through a tough time right now – the printed press in particular is taking a thumping – yet great journalism still thrives. Some recent developments in the States have been heartening: the 'Politico' website (www.politico.com), for example, for Washington political junkies started as website and now sells a print edition, and if I want to know what's happening on Capitol Hill, that's my first port of call. Additionally, some of the best investigative work for newspaper outlets has, paradoxically, been on their websites (see the *Washington Post's* 12-part series online into the Chandra Levy murder case).

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the close study and analysis required to convey key lessons for teaching. Some cases, no matter how exciting they were for me, might feel outdated to students, so one has to keep bringing new material into the classroom. Finally, sometimes a theoretical approach to teaching is simply better. For example, when teaching interview techniques, it might be more effective to discuss a 10-point guide to interviewing someone, then let students go off and practise them by themselves without a case study rattling about in their heads. Pedagogically, a powerful and vivid case study can almost overwhelm a key-lesson goal in teaching journalism, instead of reinforcing or guiding it. Judgment informed by experience is required when deciding when to strategically use this approach in the teaching timetable.

I know I am fortunate, since Strathclyde University has always encouraged me, from the Principal down to my various heads of department, to maintain a professional

teaching method. I use case studies involving everything I've covered, from murders, to terrorist attacks, to apparent suicides, to wrongful convictions to help students understand how aiming for memorable journalism means adhering to disciplined rules of research and then shooting for superb storytelling while using websites, blogging and even Facebook to unpack the tales in new ways.

I've seen evidence that underpinning the case study approach with a serious nod to the social justice mission of journalism (not always something British journalists are keen on pushing) really engages the current generation of students I meet. In my student days (the 1980s), the likes of John Pilger's documentaries, *World in Action* and early Channel 4 documentaries filled this inspirational role. That's all changed of course, but decent-sized audiences still engage with Michael Moore's polemical work, Channel 4's

And newgathering has changed – and will again – as reporters begin to use and engage with new online technological tools. The recent upheavals in Iran and China wouldn't have been known, nor shaped, had the media not accessed and interrogated Twitter and other social-networking sites.

This is exciting and compelling stuff, and the challenge for journalists and educators – sometimes the same person – is to stay relevant and teach what works and what matters in the new decades of the 21st century. ●

Additional Information

University of Strathclyde

[www.strath.ac.uk/english/courses/
journalismcreativewritingundergraduate/](http://www.strath.ac.uk/english/courses/journalismcreativewritingundergraduate/)

Eamonn O'Neill's professional site

www.eamonnoneill.net/