

Teaching Journalism Online

WJEC 2022 Online Conference

Stream meeting summary by rapporteur T.J. Thomson, Senior Lecturer, Queensland University of Technology, Australia; panel co-chairs and expert/background report by Susan Keith, Associate Professor, Rutgers University, USA, and Raluca Cozma, Professor, Kansas State University, USA (see wjec.net/2022-online-conference/ at conference streams tab).

Following an overview by Keith—based on the introduction to *Teaching Journalism Online*, a forthcoming WJEC-UNESCO handbook edited by Keith and Cozma, part of UNESCO’s Series on Journalism Education—the 90-minute session with 24 participants was organized around five questions the three stream coordinators posed: 1) In which ways is teaching journalism online different from teaching journalism in person? 2) What have you learned from teaching journalism remotely during an emergency situation (COVID-19 pandemic) that you would apply to teaching journalism online intentionally? 3) What are the most important things related to technology when instructors teach journalism online? 4) What techniques for teaching journalism online would you like to share? and 5) What is the future of teaching journalism online? Following these questions, participants were invited to share recommendations for the field that teachers/trainers would find especially interesting or useful.

1) In which ways is teaching journalism online different from teaching journalism in person?

The participants acknowledged that *time* (related to time zones and whether the learning was accomplished in a synchronous or asynchronous fashion), *space* (related to digital affordances like breakout rooms as well as physical affordances like non-verbal communication that can be lost when not all participants can see one another), and the various *cultures of journalism* that exist across geographic and social contexts were potentially different variables when teaching journalism online as compared to teaching it face-to-face. In addition to time zone considerations, participants encouraged online journalism teachers to also be aware of how *pacing* can also differ between online and face-to-face teaching. Participants said additional time might be required online to ensure pacing is appropriate for the context and that the instructor and students alike are able to be patient with all the adaptations required. Participants encouraged the approach of “Going a little bit slower in online journalism teaching.”

Related to the space aspect, some participants shared that they found *evaluation* difficult to accomplish in an online setting. In a face-to-face classroom, the instructor can inform their teaching by observing and/or responding to their students’ non-verbal expressions and can gauge progress by looking over shoulders at work in progress and providing feedback this way. Online,

some participants said their universities encouraged using tools like Kahoot.it to gauge student learning but this presented some challenges, as questions on such tools need to be formulated in advance (and thus don't allow for evaluation to happen holistically and organically) and they also tend to evaluate specific aspects (and thus might not capture other relevant aspects that should be evaluated or that affect students' understanding). Accordingly, some instructors have moved away from tools to a more discussion-based format to allow evaluation to happen more organically and holistically.

Participants agreed that *digital literacy* and *digital media skills* (for teachers and students alike) were critical competencies needed for a successful online teaching and learning experience. This includes basic operations such as how to upload media online and how to edit a WordPress site to more complex and discipline-specific operations in technical media production or editing software. Participants noted that such skills and competencies weren't universal (including among students, despite "digital native" myths) and that these should be adapted and transformed to the local context. Participants said teachers should map technologies (including particular platforms and tools) to the learning needs of one's students rather than simply following other countries' practices. It was acknowledged that students are more often consumers rather than creators and that doing a survey before the semester about student needs, accessibility, and baseline competencies (what tools and tech they had), can be a good practice to ensure teachers don't leave anyone behind.

Likewise, participants noted how *infrastructure* and *hardware/software* that might be available on campus for face-to-face learning might not be available or equally available online. Specifically, some participants shared that some software (such as Adobe's Creative Cloud applications) that their institutions paid to have installed on their on-campus lab computers was not available to students studying online. As such, the participants recommended being flexible with equipment or software options to account for this varying access. (This flexibility can also help the instructor learn about new tools or approaches, as "Students know tools and apps we don't know about.")

In a similar vein, participants identified how *digital divide* issues (such as access to reliable or fast internet) can exist for students who are off-campus and might not have adequate resources to access the session equitably. This can also affect how students engage with synchronous sessions (e.g., by not turning on their video cameras during Zoom or equivalent sessions, as using video is data-intensive and expensive [or even unavailable entirely for students in war-torn countries]). This can have flow-on effects for engagement and evaluation, as, with fewer visual cues, it can be harder to gauge student progress on a task or understanding of a concept. Lastly, participants also noted how online teaching can be subject to unique online risks, such as cyberattacks, cyberbullying, and "Zoom bombing" that need to be considered and navigated.

Participants posited that a sense of *community* was sometimes difficult to obtain in an online environment where rows of black boxes on a Zoom video platform or equivalent can be intimidating for teachers and can feel like a one-way and lifeless way to engage. The majority of participants said they allow students to choose whether they want to use video during synchronous sessions (to respect potential privacy concerns or to enable equitable access for those without fast or reliable internet) but encouraged students to at least upload a picture so there's some visual representation and uniqueness in their online avatars. When possible, participants said having an in-person interaction with students before going online can help community building and maintenance. One participant shared with the group a [list](#) of community building activities for online teaching.

2) What have you learned from teaching journalism remotely during an emergency situation (COVID-19 pandemic) that you would apply to teaching journalism online intentionally?

Some participants, who had taught courses that brought together students from two or more countries, found that teaching journalism online allowed students to have exposure to peers from markedly *different cultures* and with markedly *different attributes*, which participants reported was a profoundly enriching experience. Face-to-face teaching sometimes results in a relatively homogenous group of individuals, and the group's composition and attributes can powerfully affect the learning environment.

As noted above, student access to equipment and software can be quite varied and uneven when teaching online so participants recommended a *flexible* and *collaborative* approach to overcoming these obstacles. For example, instead of making everyone *individually* produce the *same* output using the *same* equipment and techniques, one participant noted how students could collaboratively identify who had access to what equipment and which skills and could distribute roles and tasks to collaboratively create something. For example, someone with "good" equipment might record while someone without this equipment could help write or edit.

Participants encouraged instructors to ensure their teaching is infused with *empathy* and, when possible, was *collaborative* (among both teachers and students alike). Empathy is required for the many different circumstances students find themselves in and co-teaching can lead to a richer and more streamlined learning experience. It can help spread the workload related to providing feedback, overseeing moderation, presenting conceptual material, and teaching skills, and it allows students to learn from different backgrounds and complementary life experiences. When teachers collaborate with their students through a "co-constructed problem-solving" approach, the students become more responsible for their learning, and thus more engaged, and the teachers increase their empathy while reducing the associated stress from trying to be the single source of all knowledge and expertise.

In order to cultivate a sense of *community* when teaching journalism online, some participants reported using social media tools, such as Slack, to inspire interactivity and cultural exchange in the learning sessions. This also enabled a more organized and accessible learning environment where, for example, separate “channels” can be created for specific topics, such as ethics and disinformation. Participants recommended “communicating through the media they will work in” and, for this reason, using media forms such as podcasts that are reflective of forms in the industry and that used technology (audio recording) that almost all students had access to.

Participants said remote teaching during the pandemic made them more *intentional with the scale and scope of material* they presented. Participants acknowledged that students already have access to vast quantities of information online so they recommended being intentional with what was focused on during classes so as to try to prevent information overload. This also allows an opportunity to model how to find high-quality and reliable sources and to channel the mantra of “less is more.”

Participants *cautioned against a one-size-fits-all approach*. Instead, teachers (and administrators) need to focus on “What is better online?” and “What works online?” Participants encouraged teachers and administrators to “Not try to force things” and to concede that not all classes work or work equally well online. Some work better in person and these differences should be respected and accommodated for. For example, one participant shared that being online and working independently actually mirrors certain types and forms of journalism (such as the realities of freelance journalism) more authentically than working together in the same classroom.

3) What are the most important things related to technology when instructors teach journalism online?

Participants acknowledged that technology-related considerations will depend on whether the class is conceptual or skills-based. In general, however, participants recommended that teachers use equipment and tools students already use in their daily lives rather than trying to introduce them to new equipment and tools. They gave an example of using Google Drive because students were *familiar* with that technology (documents, slides, etc.) but also cautioned that not all software is available in all regions. In one case, Google wasn’t available to students in China and so the class had to switch to using Microsoft’s OneDrive, even though it wasn’t as familiar, because of regional licensing limitations.

Some participants noted how *privacy* and *identifiability* (for both students themselves and journalist sources alike) concerns that might not be present when teaching face-to-face were sometimes present when teaching journalism online. In this context, the audience might be

global rather than just limited to the people in a physical room and, when teaching in countries with conflict or war, publicly identifying students (visually through photos or videos or in written format through quotes) or sources can lead to an elevated risk of harm. Teachers should also be aware of the hegemonic nature of big tech companies/platforms and ethical issues with using that software and with its terms of service.

When teaching online, students will already be on a screen for a potentially significant amount of time, so participants encouraged instructors to *balance* how much on- and off-screen activities they deployed in their teaching. One participant said she encouraged her students to interview people they know face-to-face to balance technology use and ensure they are not on a screen all day.

4) What techniques for teaching journalism online would you like to share?

As has been previously mentioned, not all content can be adequately taught online and it is difficult to manage student expectations about this. Participants recommended *varying the types of learning activities* (case studies, discussion groups, quizzes, exams, reflections, peer reviews, student presentations, etc.) *and materials* (audio, video, text, graphics, photos, interactives) when teaching journalism online both to promote engagement and to also cultivate a higher quality of learning. One suggested framework was to “Read, reflect, display, and do.” These are not always discrete stages but can be helpful to integrate into classes, either all in the same class or staggered over multiple classes. The “reading” stage can be generically likened to consuming a piece of content, such as reading an article, watching a video, or listening to a podcast. The “reflect” stage might include a self-evaluation or reflexive writing assignment. The “display” stage might involve identifying a case study or exemplar and analyzing how well or poorly it conforms to principles discussed during class. And the “do” stage might include editing a shared online document, writing a magazine feature, creating a visualization in free online software, such as Canva, or staging a live presentation of a group’s findings.

Participants encouraged instructors of online journalism classes to be attentive to the *duration* of synchronous sessions (and to limit them to no more than an hour due to “Zoom fatigue”) or to break up longer sessions with active, “go out and make things” activities to accommodate for shortened attention spans online.

Participants encouraged instructors to be aware of and use, as appropriate, *digital tools and affordances* in their teaching. Examples of these include live editing demonstrations of student writing via screen sharing on a Google Drive or equivalent online document and using breakout rooms to provide peer feedback before the teacher or TA reviews student work. When doing this, participants said it was important to provide structure so students learn how to evaluate each other’s work in a professional way. One such way that was offered to do this was through a

“Roses and Thorns” method. In this approach, the students are asked to present a “rose” first, commenting on what went well, and then afterward a thorn (couched in the style “I wish you would have ...”).

Participants also suggested ensuring that synchronous sessions are *interactive* and feature built-in opportunities for students to provide *feedback* and express themselves. The “polling” feature in Zoom is one such way. Others reported using an “emoji check-in,” where students were asked to select an emoji in the “reactions” tab in Zoom to let the instructor know how they were feeling (sad faces, happy faces, confused faces, etc.). Participants also recommended providing multiple avenues for students to provide feedback, noting that some students might not share something live in class but would share it through an asynchronous format, such as a voice note directly to the teacher, if that was an option.

One participant shared how her students didn’t necessarily prefer the *professionally produced instructional videos*, saying “You don’t want to feel like you’re in a military training in a class.” Her students, in contrast, seemed to prefer the authenticity of an instructor casually talking to the students rather than being too formal and professional (in a studio). When creating video content, this participant encouraged videos of 10 minutes or less.

Participants recommended *consistency*, especially for asynchronous contexts, when teaching online. This consistency applies to the class communication mode(s) and timings (e.g., weekly announcements posted on Monday and discussion board postings due by Friday) as well as the platforms and tools that students and teachers use, which assists with troubleshooting technical issues.

5) What is the future of teaching journalism online?

Participants envisioned a future where students expect *flexibility* of delivery mode and participation options. Some participants also envisioned a more student-focused future with less focus on assessment and results and more on feedback and the human experience. Participants also recommended identifying the most valuable tools journalism teaches, such as reflexivity, analysis, and empathy, and ensuring they can be delivered either in person or online.

Participants said remote teaching during the pandemic increased students’ and teachers’ awareness of *globalization* and how the internet can be used for many things beyond simply hosting an online Learning Management System with a repository for submissions and grades. Zoom and other video conferencing platforms can allow students to contact international sources (or allow teachers to bring in non-local guest presenters), conduct interviews in different languages, and see non-verbals that can inform their reporting. Online teaching and online tools can be empowering and can open up the world to students and sources alike.

Participants also anticipated experiencing additional difficulty in the coming years with *authenticating learning and assessment online*. They pondered how teachers verify what students are doing, how much they're doing, and whether they're receiving help or assistance that compromises academic integrity. Participants noted services like Openai.com and JECT.ai exist that can generate unique text and that would increasingly be used in students' assessment and wondered about how to navigate these tools (by countering them, teaching with them, or using sometimes invasive proctoring tools).

Following discussion around these five prompts, participants were invited to share recommendations for teaching journalism online that they thought would be useful or interesting to teachers. These recommendations, shared at the end and synthesized throughout the entire discussion, include:

1. Pay attention to time, space, and cultures of journalism that span social contexts and to evaluation opportunities when teaching journalism online.
2. Ensure time and opportunity are available for honing digital literacy and digital media skills in addition to class- and discipline-specific content.
3. Consider being flexible with technology requirements to ensure an equitable and collaborative learning experience.
4. Maximize the opportunities for globalization that online teaching affords while being aware of privacy and identifiability concerns and risks.
5. Avoid a one-size-fits-all approach for your journalism program and embrace the opportunity to vary the types of learning activities and materials in your online teaching.

References

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