

Learning by Doing: Teaching Multimedia Journalism Through Coverage of the 50th Anniversary of *Freedom Summer*

Journalism & Mass Communication Educator
2016, Vol. 71(4) 400–412
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DOI: 10.1177/1077695815613711
jmce.sagepub.com



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Abstract

In-depth qualitative interviews with participants of a high school journalism workshop reveal that immersing students in coverage of a historically important news event enhances learning of multimedia journalism. Study explores how using a team-based approach to coverage of the 50th anniversary of *Freedom Summer*, a key event in Mississippi's civil rights history, bolsters students' ability to learn to tell stories using text, photos, video, social media, radio, and blogs. Ramifications for multimedia education are proposed.

Keywords

multimedia, journalism, race, pedagogy, history

Introduction

The year was 1964, deep in the Jim Crow South. African American Mississippians had the right to vote. However, only 6.7% of them were registered because 70 years of poll taxes, literacy tests, and intimidation made registering risky or even impossible (Watson, 2010; Weill, 2002). Against this backdrop, hundreds of college students converged on Mississippi to help the disenfranchised to register. The effort—dubbed

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Freedom Summer—grew violent, and three civil rights workers were murdered (Hale, 2011). That summer changed the face of Mississippi—and American Democracy—by pitting the “depth of America’s bigotry against the height of America’s hopes” (Watson, 2010, prologue) and attempting to destroy the “legalized oppression of Jim Crow segregation” (Hale, 2011, p. 325).

The 50th anniversary of this transformative news event was the focus of an 8-day residential workshop at The University of Southern Mississippi in Hattiesburg, MS, that aimed to teach 16 high-achieving high school students multimedia journalism. This article explores how immersing young people in a nationally significant news event and using a team-based approach serve as a model for teaching multimedia journalism. In-depth qualitative interviews with five student workshop participants provide rich data for understanding how engaging young journalists in a significant news event enhances their learning. We rely on a constructivist approach to learning (Bruner, 1996; Dewey, 1916; Vygotsky, 1978) that incorporates multimedia learning theory (Mayer, 2005; Mayer & Moreno, 1998) and team-based learning (TBL) theory (Han & Newell, 2014; Hoag, Jayakar, & Erickson, 2003) to interpret themes that surface in the in-depth interviews. The main question this article answers is as follows: How does covering a nationally significant news event like the anniversary of *Freedom Summer* influence learning multimedia journalism?

Literature Review

Freedom Summer Workshop

The high school journalism workshop was timed to coincide with the 50th anniversary of *Freedom Summer* and with a conference marking the milestone at the university where the workshop was conducted. The aim was to connect the young workshop participants with civil rights activists from 1964 who were attending the conference. Then the young people could tell their stories using the multimedia techniques they were learning at the workshop. People attending the conference included those who witnessed *Freedom Summer* firsthand, as well as those who attended Freedom Schools. Civil rights activists organized these schools through Mississippi in 1964 to forge political consciousness among Black children as well as provide learning they could not get in segregated schools (Hale, 2011). The workshop was funded in part by the Dow Jones News Fund, which has funded workshops on college campuses nationwide back to the late 1960s.

Multimedia Journalism

The 16 students selected to participate in the workshop covered the anniversary of *Freedom Summer* conference with a variety of multimedia tools used at professional news organizations, including audio, video, social media, and photographs (E. Huang, 2007). Multimedia journalism was defined as “horizontal integration of media” (Deuze, 2004, p. 142), where a story is told across a variety of media platforms, such

as on a website, in print, and on radio or television reports. In the workshop, young people were teamed up in groups of two or more and assigned to cover specific aspects of an event using a particular multimedia tool. Typically, two students were assigned to co-write a text story, one was assigned to shoot still pictures, one was assigned to shoot video, and one was in charge blogging about the event and sharing those posts on social media. They also told stories on the radio and took turns interviewing using the broadcast style of news packages (Dawson, 2014).

Covering a story using multimedia tools was deemed an important part of these students' journalistic education because multimedia tools are increasingly being added to professional news reports as news organizations seek a wider audience (Chock, Wolf, Chen, Schweisberger, & Wang, 2013; Bock, 2011; Bull, 2010; Hong, 2012; E. Huang, 2007). News organizations are using multimedia in particular to woo a younger audience, the so-called digital natives (Prensky, 2006). This cohort spends from 6.5 to 11 hr per day multitasking with a variety of media forms (Salaway, Katz, Caruso, Kvavik, & Nelson, 2006) in today's always-on media environment (Jenkins, 2006), making multimedia stories particularly appealing for them. As more and more news moves online, multimedia is proving the norm for journalistic storytelling (Boers, Ercan, Rinsdorf, & Vaagan, 2012). This high school workshop introduced multimedia skills to budding journalists to prepare them for a collegiate journalistic education and the workplace. This article addresses the need for research into pedagogical approaches to teaching this digital transformation in journalism (Bor, 2014).

Learning by Doing

Pedagogical research suggests that immersing students in coverage of a transformative news event may enhance their ability to learn multimedia journalism because students learn by doing. For example, constructivism (Bruner, 1996; Dewey, 1916; Vygotsky, 1978) emphasizes developing students' abilities to solve real-life problems by focusing on the process that occurs through interaction with others while navigating new environments (H. M. Huang, 2002). Dewey (1916) proposed that real-life experiences offer active learning through doing and passive learning through understanding what one has done. Similarly, multimedia learning theory proposes that education through multiple formats maximizes how people process the information and encourages better recall (Downs, Boyson, Alley, & Bloom, 2011). In the workshop, students both listened to directions on how to use multimedia tools, such as cameras and video recorders, and watched demonstrations by journalism professionals. Then, constructivism was used, as they replicated that process by using the tools themselves to cover the *Freedom Summer* anniversary.

The transformative nature of the *Freedom Summer* news event played a role in their learning. Historians have long found that using films of historic events enhances learning (Oliver, 2011). In this workshop, covering a real news event provided the students with "shared experiences" (Hart, 2001, p. 33) that they could use to create news through multiple formats. In this way, they learned how to use multimedia tools through the process of using them (Dewey, 1916; Matheson, 2004), rather than

learning the tools as an end in and of itself. This encourages students to challenge themselves as they learn new skills by doing, an approach supported by both social cognitive theory (Bandura, 2009) and constructivism (Bruner, 1996; Dewey, 1916; Vygotsky, 1978). As constructivism suggests, this approach narrows the gap between the lesson and the real world and utilizes instructional materials that encourage social interaction to solve problems (H. M. Huang, 2002).

TBL

The theory of TBL (Han & Newell, 2014; Michaelsen, 1992) also supports the idea of learning multimedia journalism through team-based coverage of a news event. The workshop applied parts of this approach by using teams to report on the *Freedom Summer* anniversary and conference, as well as to produce multimedia stories about it. The TBL approach suggests this method helps students understand how to perform activities, rather than just learn about a topic (Michaelsen, 1992). Constructivism also supports this idea because it focuses on learning through social interaction with other classmates (H. M. Huang, 2002). This is particularly relevant when the goal is teaching multimedia journalism tools, such as how to shoot video or create a radio report, because performing these skills is inherent to learning them. This ability to learn by observing others enhances the capacity to acquire behaviors and reduces inhibition one might have in exhibiting those behaviors (Bandura, 1971). When applied to the *Freedom Summer* workshop, it would stand to reason that young people watching their classmates shoot and record multimedia stories or blog and tweet about the events would both provide instruction to them and free them from fears of trying multimedia tools themselves.

Based on this literature, this study seeks to answer the following:

RQ1: How does covering a nationally significant news event influence learning multimedia journalism?

RQ2: What specific aspects of covering a live news event while learning multimedia journalism were most effective pedagogically?

RQ3: What role—if any—did dividing the young people into teams to cover the event have on their learning?

RQ4: What lasting effects—if any—did this immersive journalistic experience produce?

Method

This study qualitatively examined how immersing high school journalism students in coverage of the 50th anniversary of *Freedom Summer* influenced their ability to learn multimedia journalism. Workshop participants consisted of 12 girls and 4 boys. Five of the participants are White, and the rest are African American. They were all sophomores, juniors, or seniors at the time of the workshop in June 2014. Two of the researchers were co-directors for the workshop, and the third, who conducted the interviews, was not involved in the workshop.

The researcher who conducted the interviews used McCracken's (1988) long interview technique, which allows researchers to see the world through the eyes of the research subject (Cassell, 1977). All 16 workshop participants were contacted via email, Facebook, and postal mail, and five agreed to be interviewed. Four of the respondents are African American, and one is White. All are female. Although this sample size is small, it represents 31.25% of our total population of interest, which is not unusual in qualitative interview-based studies where statistical inference is not sought (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006; Ritchie, Lewis, Nicholls, & Ormston, 2013). Sample sizes in qualitative interview studies, such as this one, are typically small because the size is based on the idea that interviews are conducted until increasing the sample would yield little new knowledge (Ritchie et al., 2013), a concept called saturation.

Before interviews were conducted, participants signed an assent form, and their parent or guardian signed a permission form, in accordance with the Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval for research participants younger than 18. Interviews took place between December 2014 and January 2015. Interviews ranged from 45 to 60 min and were audiotaped and transcribed. The researcher posed a series of open-ended questions, asking about respondents' impressions of covering the *Freedom Summer* anniversary, what aspects of the workshop were most and least helpful, what skills they felt they learned, and what influence—if any—covering this real news event had on their learning. In accordance with the IRB approval, respondents' names were not used.

The goal was to foster a sense of understanding of their experience by examining the meaning inherent in their interview responses, using an interpretist paradigm (Brechin & Sidell, 2000) of deriving meaning rather than collecting facts (Johnson, 2000). To analyze the data, the researcher read through transcripts several times to find themes in what participants were saying and grasp how people construct meaning (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). Responses were compared again and again (Johnson, 2000), until themes emerged, and then we interpreted the themes using theory.

Results

Four broad themes emerge from the interview data analysis. Each theme addresses one of our research questions, as detailed below.

Learning Through History

Our first research question asks how covering a nationally significant news event like the anniversary of *Freedom Summer* influenced the respondents' learning of multimedia journalism. The respondents reported that they were aware of *Freedom Summer* and its significance before the workshop, but covering the anniversary enhanced their understanding. One participant explained, "I knew about the *Freedom Summer* issue because we have studied it in U.S. history class. But never before was the issue so alive!" Respondents agreed that the choice of topic was influential in how they learned multimedia skills. One participant said,

The selection of the topic heavily influenced how and how much I learned multimedia journalism. It was very useful to teach me about the advances in the field and think of events and stories like this in terms of multimedia.

For others, the topic highlighted the importance of civil rights in a powerful way that encouraged them to think of different ways they could use multimedia to tell this story. One respondent's words highlight this:

I mean civil rights that have impacted all our lives—could it get any bigger? This workshop gave us a chance to meet really influential people, and the whole idea of the content and the people made me realize how wonderful multimedia can be in helping bring their stories out to the world.

Participants found the hands-on approach the workshop used especially inspiring. They noted the value in meeting veterans of *Freedom Summer*, and this positively influenced how they viewed multimedia. One respondent said,

I knew that the whole topic was historically very inspiring and important. But what made it really great was the fact that it let us meet a lot of people—those who were associated with the event itself. . . . They have lived such a momentous event in history, and their stories must be made accessible to all. Multimedia is a perfect vehicle for that.

In particular, the respondents' interview with Anthony Harris had a profound effect on them. Harris, now professor of education at Mercer University in Georgia, is an African American who was 11 years old in 1964 Mississippi. Two participants mentioned how interviewing Harris changed their ideas about the power of multimedia journalism. One participant's comment expressed the influence interviewing Harris had on her learning:

I interviewed Anthony Harris for my project, and that broke the barrier between being just a high school student and a journalist immediately. Thinking about how I could put his story into multimedia was wonderful. I mean here was this person who—when 11—went to a school where other children spat on him, but for him nonviolence was more than a choice. How do you get this powerful story that can change lives even now into a multimedia format?

Another respondent found the topic “surreal” and said,

The topic was so powerful that it sort of propelled me to make this story happen. . . . I think multimedia serves a very important role in such stories. Multimedia stories are especially geared towards the Internet and many people now only exclusively find their stories online. Also more young people read online, and these sorts of stories aren't even available in most history books. To ensure that more audiences read and see the stories, multimedia elements must be incorporated in their telling. They can then be accessed by a whole range of different voices and people then whose awareness about such issues will increase.

The interview sessions with activists from *Freedom Summer* helped participants go beyond the moment and think about larger issues of civil rights and how the media covers these topics. As one participant said, “The experiences that the people shared with me encouraged me to think about myself as a future journalist and what will be my real motivations for covering a story.” These data suggest that the students were using the news event of *Freedom Summer* as a form of praxis (Lather, 1991) to understand the experiences they were sharing (Hart, 2001) by covering a story that motivated and mobilized them (Hale, 2011). They were learning journalism as a process (Matheson, 2004) in a constructivist approach that emphasized learning through solving real-world problems (Bruner, 1996; Dewey, 1916; H. M. Huang, 2002; Vygotsky, 1978), rather than merely acquiring discrete journalistic skills.

Storytelling Through Multimedia

Our second research question deals with what aspects of covering a live news event while learning multimedia journalism were most effective. The participants interviewed uniformly agreed that telling a story through multimedia was exciting. One participant explained,

I loved learning how to do the blogs. It’s like making little stories that you can post to create your own news site or paper or whatever. I didn’t think that putting across a story or even a story from your life could be this simple.

Another respondent said she always enjoyed photography but did not know how to make good pictures before the workshop. “Now I know pictures have so much power,” she said.

Although the participants interviewed each had a favorite tool, they agreed that the workshop showed them different ways stories could be told. One respondent said,

I learned how to do multimedia interviews. It’s very different when we do interviews for a usual print story, you know. It changed the way I now look at interviews. I now see why TV anchors behave in a certain way and magazine interviews feel a certain way.

For some, it changed the way they viewed how media work. One participant said, “I mean without this workshop I would have believed that broadcast journalism was all about getting a camera and yelling ‘action,’ but that is not true. We must always be prepared for the unexpected. A story doesn’t come easy.”

The immersive multimedia aspects of the workshop were also useful in teaching basic journalism skills to participants. Multimedia allowed the students to take an active role in their educational process, rather than be passive recipients (Dewey, 1916; H. M. Huang, 2002; Montgomery, 1995). This suggests the approach aided their learning and ability to feel uninhibited in demonstrating their news skills, as both constructivism (Dewey, 1916) and social learning theory would predict (Bandura, 1971). One participant explained,

I learned many useful multimedia skills, but, more importantly, we learned how to draft a good article, create a great lead and draw people in. . . . I realized that no matter what it's very important to have a good story and ensure that people get something from my story.

“Teamwork Is Power!”

Participants consistently agreed that working in groups was one of the best aspects of the workshop, answering our third research question. To cover parts of the *Freedom Summer* anniversary and conference, participants worked in groups of two to five, with each student in charge of telling the story with a specific tool. Participants' rotated through tasks during the conference, so they could each use all the tools. One participant's comments on this team-based work echoed others' sentiments:

I think the most important part of the whole program was the fact that it showed us how to work in teams. I learned from some really smart people, and we learned from each other. It was a great sense of community. I am still connected with so many of them on Facebook and Instagram, and often we take photos and tag each other in it. Teamwork is power!

For others, working in teams helped them learn together and discover each other's areas of interest. One participant said, “Working in teams was great. We each took turns to be in print and behind the camera and that worked really great.” Another reported, “We could decide how and in what ways we will incorporate multimedia elements and present the story. It really helped me learn concepts of multimedia and, perhaps more importantly, journalism better.” The participants' experiences suggest that they appreciated at some level the connectivism (Dunaway, 2011) implicit in the team-teaching method at the workshop. They were able to gain a variety of experience while seeing similarities and differences in their various roles as multimedia journalists. These data suggest that the students were modeling each other's behavior, as social learning theory predicts (Bandura, 1971), and that this process enhances learning. In addition, the social interaction inherent in the learning process bolstered their education, as constructivism suggests (Dewey, 1916; H. M. Huang, 2002).

Skills for the Future

Participants interviewed said that they have used the multimedia skills they learned at the workshop in some way on a daily basis since then, answering our fourth research question. For most of them, working on the high school newspaper or yearbook is an outlet for these skills. For others, the workshop ignited interests in social media and blogging. One participant explained,

I am doing the yearbook in school and also have my own YouTube channel where I do videos and video blogs where I comment on stuff. I recently posted a video on high

school pet peeves. I am interested in human rights and try to read up more on such issues, be more aware of human rights as a whole.

Multimedia skills honed at the workshop sparked thoughts about future careers for some participants. “This workshop was very useful in helping me take my own aspirations to be a journalist more seriously,” one said. For another, the workshop pointed her to a career outside journalism. She said,

The workshop was instrumental in showing me that even though I loved photography I could be a better editor and publisher—that my real passion and skill set lay in working in the area of publishing and editing rather than journalism per se.

The effects of covering the anniversary of *Freedom Summer* were not limited to the realm of journalism. “The workshop had a perfect intro and so many intricate details were discussed that I feel my perspectives on the way I view history changed,” one participant said. “I am now able to talk to my grandparents more. I showed the newspaper we had produced in the workshop to my teacher in class. She was very impressed.” Another felt that the students’ efforts at the workshop persuaded her that her generation is not lost. “It gave me a sense of hope that we aren’t a lazy notorious generation incapable of anything meaningful. It taught me that we have the power to advocate for a better world,” she said. Like those who attended the original Freedom Schools and were emboldened to work for civil rights (Hale, 2011), these students’ words suggest covering the anniversary of *Freedom Summer* ignited their passions to work for change in their own society.

Discussion

The main goal of this study is to understand how having high school students cover a nationally significant news event influences how they learn multimedia journalism. Specifically, this study seeks to make sense of how immersing young people in covering the anniversary of *Freedom Summer* influences their learning, and what aspects of the coverage are most effective. Furthermore, we seek to understand what role teams used at the workshop had in student learning, and what lasting effects—if any—this experience provides for the participants.

Overall, our data clearly show covering the anniversary of *Freedom Summer* had a profound effect on the young participants and their view of journalists’ impact. As one explained,

It brought home a powerful truth to me that we journalists play a very important role in history. Ours is the job to record and document history, so that future generations can read and learn and appreciate the times gone by.

Using a news event such as *Freedom Summer* to teach multimedia journalism offers opportunities for discussion of human rights and racial issues (Alexandra, 2008).

Respondents pointed out that the choice of topic persuaded them that multimedia could be a vehicle for highlighting narratives such as racial tension. Participants noted that although they had learned about *Freedom Summer* in history classes, the workshop showed them nuances and brought alive the moment for them, thus maximizing learning as constructivism suggests (Dewey, 1916; H. M. Huang, 2002). As the students learned the basics of broadcast, newspaper, online, and radio journalism, they understood how these platforms could be combined to create an effective multimedia product (Deuze, 2004). Although young people today might be digital natives (Prensky, 2006), the workshop enhanced their understanding of how to use social media as a reporting tool. This was also an opportunity for students to experience how the combination of words, pictures, and sound can enhance the presentation (Montgomery, 1995).

Theoretical Implications

Constructivism proposes that using real-world examples—learning by doing—enhances education (Bruner, 1996; Dewey, 1916), and social interaction with others helps students as they maneuver through new environments (H. M. Huang, 2002). Multimedia learning theory (Mayer, 2005) suggests learning is presented through a variety of formats (Downs et al., 2011). Clearly, our data support both these notions. Participants learned by modeling their instructors and classmates. They learned how to use new tools such as broadcast cameras or blogs by using them again and again. It is evident from the data that the young people were both challenged by this approach and that it helped them try new things (Bandura, 1971; Dewey, 1916). TBL theory (Michaelsen, 1992) also seems quite relevant to the students' experiences. They were grouped in teams for much of the workshop, and they rotated to learn specific skills. Our findings show that this approach helped students to *do* multimedia journalism, rather than just learn about it.

Practical Implications

These findings suggest quite strongly that teaching young people multimedia journalism by immersing them in a powerful news event has value. In a high school or college classroom, this approach may be challenging because newsworthy events may not happen within the time frame of the class. However, certainly at residential journalism workshops, such as this one, an aim should be to focus on larger immersive events, rather than teaching skills in isolation from each other or by covering smaller, less transformative news events. Workshops that have a multicultural component are especially valuable because they will attract a more diverse group of applicants, including those who might otherwise not apply.

Journalism education at the secondary level is rare in many public school systems, especially those that serve large populations from underrepresented groups (Prince, 2012). Newsrooms continue to suffer from few journalists of color: Ninety percent of America's newsroom leaders are White, and only about 13% of all journalists are

people of color (Vanasco, 2013). A topic like *Freedom Summer* worked well to attract a diverse applicant pool, but a workshop designed to address cultural diversity need not focus on the anniversary of a seminal historical event. Issues that face underrepresented groups—economic, health, or educational disparities, for instance—would provide an equally compelling journalistic challenge.

Limitation

It should be noted that the small size of our sample—five participants—is a limitation of this research, so some caution is advised. Although we would have liked to interview more people, prior research has found that even a small number of participants in qualitative interview-based studies may produce rich data and saturation of an idea—where adding more participants would not increase knowledge (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006; Ritchie et al., 2013). Even with our small sample, we believe we achieved saturation, so this limitation does not negate our findings.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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