

Wrestling with the future

IS TRADITIONAL PRINT
JOURNALISM DEAD?

WILL VIDEO AND
MULTIMEDIA REPLACE
STILL PHOTOGRAPHY?

ARE BLOGS AND
TWEETS THE NEWS
MEDIA OF THE FUTURE?

ARE WE SPENDING TOO MUCH
TIME TEACHING SOFTWARE
AND NOT ENOUGH TIME
TEACHING CONTENT?

WHAT IS THE BEST WAY TO BLEND
THEORY AND PRACTICE IN OUR
CURRICULUM?

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We who teach journalism and mass communications are sometimes compelled to predict the future. What professional skills will our students need to master by the time they graduate? What is the best method to help them achieve this mastery?

Because we have no journalistic crystal ball, we are sometimes forced to wrestle with vexing questions: is traditional print journalism dead? Will video and multimedia replace still photography? Are blogs and tweets the news media of the future? Are we spending too much time teaching software and not enough time teaching content? What is the best way to blend theory and practice in our curriculum?

It seems journalism and mass communications perfectly illustrate the maxim of Heraclitus that change is the only constant. But there is one additional constant: the need for our students to acquire solid business skills.

In other words, they need to understand that the theory and practice of entrepreneurship will never go out of fashion.

For those students planning a freelance career, acquiring solid business skills is essential. And those who plan to become media employees also need to understand that entrepreneurship will help them succeed in an ever-more-demanding corporate environment. So how will our students acquire these skills? Amid the studies in graphic design, advertising, public relations, and broadcasting, where will students learn marketing, self-promotion, negotiating, financial planning, copyright, contracts, and all the other necessities of running a business?

Freelancing for creative professionals

At the University of South Carolina's School of Journalism and Mass Communications, we are offering an experimental course, "Freelancing for creative professionals". The focus is on how to start and operate your own successful freelance business. I taught a similar course in San Francisco that concentrated on the business practices of photography. For this course, I am expanding the field to include not only photographers, but also videographers, multimedia producers, web designers, and graphic designers, along with those wanting to start their own advertising and public relations firms. Over the course of the semester, I will explain the theory and practice of entrepreneurship and provide students a solid footing on which to stand when they leave the university.

Course topics

During our 28 class meetings, we will discuss the nature of small business and self-employment and determine the characteristics of the successful entrepreneur. Students will also learn about the types of small businesses, including sole proprietorships, partnerships, and corporations. We will examine sources of capitalisation for starting a small business.

Students will learn the importance of creating a written business plan; a professional portfolio and resumé; and detailed marketing, self-promotion, advertising, and sales strategies. We will study various sales techniques and methods for getting and retaining clients. Students will learn to set fees, negotiate with

clients, and determine fixed costs, billable expenses, and realistic markups.

We will then cover the legal and ethical aspects of running a small business, including copyright and trademark, along with issues such as time management, scheduling, taxes, business licenses, insurance, and employees. For their final project, students will prepare a detailed written business plan for their proposed creative professional business.

So many books, so little time

Type the keyword "freelancing" on Amazon.com and you get more than 6 000 results. Clearly, there are many books to choose from if you are looking for a textbook to use in a course on freelancing.

As it turns out, a Nolo Press book by media and communications consultant Peri Pakroo, *The Small Business Start-Up Kit*, perfectly fits the bill. Subtitled *A Step-by-Step Legal Guide*, this book has chapters on choosing a legal structure for your business; picking the right business name and location; writing a winning business plan; pricing, bidding, and billing projects; federal, state, and local start-up requirements; risk management; taxes; running a business from home; contracts and agreements; bookkeeping, accounting, and financial management; marketing; web sites and e-commerce; change-of-ownership issues; employees; and using professionals such as lawyers and accountants.

Assignments

I am devising assignments that will both develop understanding of the course material and provide information students can actually use as they plan and start their own business. Here are some I have used before:

- Answering a questionnaire to help determine whether the student is suited for self employment.
- Preparing a detailed monthly budget to determine the student's current income and expenses.
- Creating a break-even analysis, based on projected income and expenses, to gauge the possibility of profitability.
- Developing a preliminary client list.
- Writing an estimate of start up costs and capital expenses needed to launch the business.
- And, for the final project, submitting a completed business plan.

Students are sometimes surprised at how much writing and math are involved in starting a business – welcome to the entrepreneurial environment!

Obviously, the business world is in flux, given the current economy. For some of my students, this must be a scary time to contemplate leaving the relative security of college and embarking on a career. Other natural entrepreneurs will see great opportunity lurking in the recession and will be eager to test their talents.

Fortunately, many resources are available to the up-and-coming entrepreneur, including trade associations. Part of my mission as an educator is to encourage students to join professional organisations so they can network with colleagues and continue their education after graduation.

Whether our students plan to go it alone or connect with like-minded creative professionals, I believe a solid foundation in the theory and practice of entrepreneurship will serve them well.