

Distance yearning

Done right, online courses could help democratize our newsrooms

BY LORI HENSON

In March 2012, I stood with three journalism students in Times Square, taking in the lights, color, and scope of humanity. We had flown in from Indiana for the College Media Advisers annual conference, and the trip to New York City was a new experience for all of us. Two of the students from the private, Catholic, women's college in Indiana where I was teaching were traditional, on-campus students, approaching or just past their 20th birthdays.

The third student, Stephanie, was a year older than I, both of us in our late 30s. She was an online student, and until that weekend all our communication had been through email, discussion boards, Facebook, and the occasional phone call. She took a couple of classes at a time while working full-time as a massage therapist in Indianapolis—one of the 6.7 million students taking an online class, many of whom would have a hard time getting a degree without this option.

Online enrollment across all academic programs has steadily increased for the past decade, according to a recent study by the Babson Survey Research Group. Journalism programs began to embrace distance courses relatively recently. The University of Texas is the latest university to expand its massive open online courses, or moocs, to include media-related classes. But few journalism programs at established universities offer a fully online degree.

Stephanie, bright and unmarried, was surprised but thrilled to be invited on the New York trip. She says she had never considered a career in journalism until, at her graduation from a massage-therapy program, an instructor read aloud an essay Stephanie had written. She says she overheard someone in the audience say, "Stephanie should be a writer."

But like many nontraditional students, Stephanie initially lacked confidence. She was especially self-conscious and shy about conducting interviews. She struggled to step outside her familiar social circles to find sources for her stories. Without face-to-face contact, I had little way of knowing

whether her sources were close friends or relatives. I had shy students on campus, too, but with them I was able to give in-person pep talks and, in one case, even write a script for a telephone interview and sit beside the student as she conducted the interview to help her overcome her fears.

In the lights of Times Square, I saw Stephanie push through the crowds and embrace her adventure. Her biggest challenge that weekend, she told me, was a conference workshop that required her to approach strangers for man-on-the-street interviews. But she conquered her fear, and between sessions went on her own to shops and landmarks she had only seen on TV, hailed cabs, and rode the subway.

Getting to witness Stephanie's coming-out party was a luxury for me. I had taught a combination of traditional and distance courses for two years at that point. I loved working with students like Stephanie, who balanced school with some combination of a career, children, spouses, aging parents, and countless other real-world stressors.

During graduate school at Indiana University, I had grown accustomed to teaching upper-middle-class students, full of confidence and often a sense of entitlement, some of whom even had ties to New York magazines or other media legacies. My Big Ten students were sought out for opportunities.

My distance students, on the other hand, had to make their own way. Recruiters did not seek them out, but they had so much to offer. The stories they wrote addressed financial problems and economic trends that often never occurred to my traditional students. One wrote about battered women and the many legal frustrations they face in seeking help, not from an outsider's perspective, but as someone who had worked with battered women. A working mom reported on issues of transracial adoption, based on the experiences of neighbors who had adopted. And while most journalism students report on community events, meetings, and social issues in their coursework, few cover school board meetings from the perspective of a parent, or

bring the experience of being a tax-paying homeowner to a city council meeting.

This was the journalistic diversity that brought me to academia. I wanted to be part of making journalism more accommodating and accessible for those who think they don't belong in The Media. These online courses, though far from perfect, have the potential to help democratize newsrooms and news content.

While a lot of attention rightly has been paid to diversifying newsrooms along race, ethnic, and gender lines, there is less discussion of class hierarchies. Scholars have been writing for more than 25 years about the professionalization of journalism and the problems that creates for inclusive coverage of working-class communities. At first, the Internet was seen as the solution for getting non-elite voices into media. But legacy media websites still dominate online news content, and without a reliable way to monetize online news, it's not yet conceivable that someone like Stephanie could start her own site and earn a living that way.

According to a study by the University of Georgia's Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communication, women made up nearly 62 percent of journalism students in 2011. But research by David Weaver and his colleagues at Indiana University, who have studied journalists for more than three decades, finds that women's newsroom careers tend to be shorter than their male counterparts because of the strain a journalism job puts on family life. This is especially true for journalists whose working-class families have fewer resources for childcare and eldercare.

Online journalism education is one way to bring working-class experiences and perspectives into elite media.

Still, I missed sharing in my students' adventures. One of the steep downsides of online education is that it can rob an instructor—and the student—of the most fun and rewarding aspects of teaching: the energy of the performance in the classroom, the impromptu conversations between classes, and the moments of spontaneity that enrich the educational experience and create memories every semester. In fact, faculty backlash against online education appears to be building, as instructors cite the long hours and constant challenge to interact with online students that are inherent in the format.

Online instructors must be open to answering questions day and night. Feedback on assignments that would take 10 seconds to speak takes 10 minutes to write. The flexibility that is so appealing to workers, parents, and all the others drawn to distance education is the teacher's burden. There are no limits to the instructional day.

The rigidity and necessary standardization of online courses means that I rarely get to take advantage of breaking news and of-the-moment topics that energize a classroom experience. During the Boston Marathon bombing coverage in April, I brought up on the classroom screen nbc News's live online feed for my on-campus reporting students, and we discussed the tactics and themes in the coverage. I haven't found a way to do something similar in an online context, in which assignments, quizzes, and discussions are often prepared and static from the first day of the course.

And yet I know that online journalism courses have

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brought students into the field who would have had a very difficult time in a traditional classroom. In the couple of years I taught distance journalism courses, my students included a paralyzed man for whom online journalism classes—and an online writing career—were his only practical ways to have a career in journalism.

Another student was an Iraq War veteran whose post-traumatic stress disorder made online courses his best option. His stories dealt with veterans' struggles to get health services through the Department of Veterans Affairs, as well as with homelessness and suicide—issues that, unfortunately, are part of the reality for many veterans. After a number of setbacks and a great deal of help from his family, the former soldier earned his bachelor's degree and now covers sports and community events for a weekly newspaper in the Northwest. He is working on a book about his military service.

Making journalism courses more available to more kinds of people seems an important way to produce critical thinkers and leaders at all levels of society. Online education's ability to reach nontraditional students in both rural and urban areas has been part of the utopian promise of the medium from its beginning.

My experience developing and teaching online courses was one of the reasons I got my current job, teaching journalism at Indiana State University. The online courses are expanding here, and I have already been asked to look into developing an online media-law course.

But navigating the years ahead should include frank discussions about how to give online students the flexibility and the access without sacrificing the relationships, the spontaneity, the adventures. Journalism programs, in addition to creating online courses, could do more community outreach to demystify the field for those who feel disconnected from The Media. Conventional programs should attempt to include online students in campus events and involve them in student media. Enrichment experiences, such as conferences and workshops, should include online students.

Stephanie's weekend in New York was the first of many new experiences journalism has brought her. She has contributed stories to small newspapers in the Indianapolis region while working her way through school. This fall, she will begin her senior year in the online journalism program at St. Mary-of-the-Woods. We need more students like her. **CJR**

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