

“Master Class: Teaching Advice for Journalism and Mass Communication Professors” being written by members of the AEJMC Standing Elected Committee on Teaching. My chapter is the first – “So, you’re a college instructor. Now what?”

1. What’s your point of view on teaching being a calling - not a job?

Teaching is definitely a calling. I’m not sure that a person who works for decades in the gritty world of television news would trade that “job” with walking into and teaching a classroom full of eager and curious co-eds, just for fun. There is no script by which to follow for a professor. Even a syllabus is just a shell. There is not a fill-in-the-blanks formula when it comes to the various topics and objectives to help students transition from classroom to newsroom. You have to love a challenge. You have to thrive off of a different type of pressure- and adapting to the ever-changing definition of news. You have to meet the students where they are- which is an entirely different issue. It’s easier to sit behind a screen and write an article or op-ed, or craft a rundown or package script, than to teach would-be journalists the various concepts of news and then put that pedagogy into practice. There are strict objectives and outcomes to be met, guidelines adhered to, and a clear understanding of not just terms, writing and interviewing techniques. Journalism students must be able to have a clear understanding of the media’s role in a convergent society, and in many cases become multimedia journalists (MMJs) who can do it all- well.

2. Since you have professional experience, did you tell lots of war stories when you first began teaching? If so, why? If not, why not? Did the way you incorporated your war stories into your teaching change over time?

I did share my war stories when I first began teaching, and I continue to do so today. I use it to help bring the tips and stories from the textbook to life. I agree with the saying by George Santayana that “one of the greatest challenges of education is to get experience out of ideas.” I don’t have to have my students read accounts of covering September 11th. I am able to share my personal stories as the 9am producer at CNN on that fateful day. I can discuss covering other breaking news events, national conventions and elections as well as the realities involved with meeting deadlines, working with difficult personalities and dozens of other topics. These personal reflections create lively dialogue during lectures, and even garners respect from the students. I particularly use this strategy of sharing “war stories” when discussing media ethics in the capstone journalism course. The students randomly draw different scenarios and then work in groups to discuss the best ethical solutions to the dilemmas presented in the various scenarios. After they finish, I reveal that each scenario is one I have actually encountered as a journalist. This results in a lively discussion, generates questions on how the situations were

handled, and as a result, leads to an easy transition to the lecture. I found that the students appreciate the fact that their professor has real-life experience.

3. If you began your teaching career as an adjunct, why did you first decide to do adjunct teaching? What were your unique challenges and rewards? Now that you're teaching full-time, how did you find making the transition from adjunct to full-time faculty member – differences?

I began my teaching career as an adjunct professor just months after completing graduate school. I must add that I returned to grad school more than 20 years after completing my undergraduate degree. The transition was somewhat organic. Graduate school was a bucket list item, but not necessarily part of my plan for teaching. I always enjoyed working with interns at various networks and organizations, and always received positive feedback. I learned of the adjunct position from a friend who was a professor at the university. That conversation led to an interview and the opportunity to serve as an adjunct professor teaching two courses-- a mass media introductory class and a media ethics course. Both were mandatory prerequisites, and one was an upper level course. The challenges were many. Would the students relate to me? Was I the best person to teach these courses? Did I have the right temperament to work with 18-21 year olds? Would my content be interesting? (I could continue!) I decided to use some of the strategies I employed as an executive producer with a show team consisting of various individuals with varying experiences. I utilized the tenets of journalism: listening (a lot); and observation. The rewards were seeing students "lean in" during the lectures and then stay after class to share how much they enjoyed the class and discussions. The following semester both classes were at capacity, and students shared that I was considered a tough, yet fair and fun professor. I made it a point to regularly attend graduation and receptions/ meet-and-greets with the students and their families. I, and other fellow adjuncts also regularly met with the department chair to discuss challenges and strategies. Doing these things helped make the transition from adjunct to full-time faculty member easier. I was accustomed to meetings because of attending them at my previous institutions. I felt better prepared for things such as amending syllabi, ordering textbooks, and maintaining office hours because I did these things when I was part-time. I did not hesitate to confer with fellow colleagues and the department chairperson for guidance. Overall, it was a stress-free transition.

4. If you're relatively new to teaching (or you remember your days as a newbie), what were your fears as a new professor?

(See above) In addition to my aforementioned fears as a new professor, my biggest fear as a new professor was that the students would not be prepared for an immediate transition into the workforce. I was also concerned at times that I was "too hard" with the students and may have set unrealistic expectations. These fears were calmed after the first commencement,

when I began getting letters, emails and phone calls with graduates who shared how well-prepared they felt as they were taking writing tests for internships, and as they were beginning jobs and graduate schools. This was the culmination of the students' hard work and my commitment. Each and every graduate thanks me for pushing them, and preparing them for their current positions. I learned what one of my mentors shared to be true, "Remember, you are the expert. You will always know more than they."

5. If you ever served as a department or program chair or conducted new faculty orientation, what was your advice to new instructors?

N/A

6. Please share any common mistakes professors should avoid:

Don't let pushy students change your mind about a grade, or how you conduct your class. Students talk and share strategies. If they know you will let something slide- they will try you. Don't be afraid to admit that you've made a mistake. If you do make a mistake, apologize. Show your humanity. Students want to know that you care about them and have some empathy. Follow your instincts.

7. What do I know now that I wish I knew when I began teaching (how many???) years ago?

When I began teaching I wish I knew how valuable my experience in the industry was to the Academy. At major research universities, a majority of tenure-track professors have doctorate degrees. Those in communications are amongst the few areas that accept commensurate experience for our field of study. This is something for which to be proud. We need academicians who can apply practical experience to their pedagogy and in the end provide the students with academic and practical knowledge. I often leaned on advice from former professors who spent years in the industry. They often shared stories from their experiences. I also found mentors who had similar backgrounds. Their advice and encouragement were vital in my first year as a full-time tenure-track faculty member.

Note3: As part of the chapter, I'm also looking for longer (200 – 400 word) *From the Trenches* essays for the following sections

You're Not Just Telling War Stories

There was a time when I was hesitant to "talk shop" outside of the newsroom. Journalists are a strange yet wonderful fraternity. We don't flinch when discussing coverage of unnerving stories. We have all worked cruel and unusual schedules and have had crazy behind-the-scenes encounters in control rooms, studios and newsrooms. We have met people in the field who

give credence to the saying that “truth is stranger than fiction.” We are tough, but humane. As a journalism professor, sharing “the real deal” is crucial. Discussing the stories that you’ve encountered in the field is a necessary part of your teaching philosophy. It helps shape the student and brings to life the stories and antidotes in the journalism textbooks. It shows the student that you are the master of this topic, because you’ve “been there, done that.”

“If you’re feelings get hurt easily, if you don’t like getting up to report to work at 4am, if you can’t accept working holidays, weekends and birthdays, and if you can’t accept making low salary for a high-pressured stressful job, then this may not be the career for you.” This is how I often begin my journalism courses. I then transition to share how journalism shapes history and how we hold some of the most important roles in society.

My first year teaching was the fall of 2011. I had just earned an MA degree in journalism, after working 20 years full-time as a broadcast journalist. As I was preparing the syllabus, I realized one class was taking place on the 10 year anniversary of September 11th. I was the 9am newscast producer at CNN on this fateful day, and hitherto had not discussed my feelings in depth. It was just too emotional. However, I decided to share and also discuss some of the ethical implications of showing graphic images then and now (the anniversary). We then shifted gears to allow each student to share a reflection of that day. To my surprise, it was one of the most impactful classes of the year. Several students were from New York City and had vivid recollections of the tragedy. We were able to discuss the media’s coverage and put it into perspective. I learned valuable lessons that day—that sometimes going off-script is necessary, that students appreciate really being heard, and that experience shapes education.

Ex: Sept 11 / Media Ethics (truth is stranger than fiction)

Your reference info:

- Name – way you want me to refer to you: Assistant Professor Jennifer C. Thomas
- Your discipline: Broadcast Journalism
- # of years working in the profession: 20 years full-time (6 years freelancing- still a freelance producer with CNN)
- # of years teaching: 6 years (2 years as an adjunct, 4 years full-time/tenure-track)
- Do you have a graduate degree? Yes | Master of Arts, Arts & Culture concentration, Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism