Travel as a teaching approach for new media skills and writing courses

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In today’s global community, local and overseas travels are essential to student learning. This paper posits that travel enhances students’ journalism experience and can be used to facilitate their education in new media and digital technology. Portable digital media technologies, which students are highly familiar with, create opportunities to teach them hands-on convergence and multimedia skills in travel-based journalism courses. The paper concludes with examples of how travel and new media technologies are combined to teach traditional news reporting, feature writing, travel writing, and other courses regardless of whether the program has an international or multimedia-convergence emphasis.
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Today’s new media technology can be taught in a traditional classroom, a sophisticated multimedia lab, or just about anywhere else, for instance, on the road while traveling with students. The combination of portable new media technologies and declining costs of internet access make their use practicable both on and off campus. Many students today have their own laptop computers or at least a small digital camera and have access to digital audio and video recording devices. Many own 3G or 4G cell phones. Taking a new media-based course on the road makes sense if the objective is to enhance students’ reporting, writing, and editing skills using new media. Travel itself creates valuable story telling opportunities for students.

At the University of Miami, groups of our students have spent the summers of 2006 through 2010 in China. During two of those years, some also visited Thailand. They have had many of their best stories and blogs distributed for global readership on a course-based website (http://com.miami.edu/china). They also produced dozens of extended feature stories and photo packages about the places they saw and the people they met. In 2009, visual communication and journalism students spent about two weeks in Idaho producing content for the Special Olympics World Winter Games official website. Their work included still photography, interviewing and story writing, video shooting and editing for web packages and audio slideshows (http://live.specialolympics.org/).

Another group visited Panama to report about fresh water issues for a Knight Center for International Media website (http://1h2o.org) devoted to global water problems. The project was the cornerstone of an upper level reporting and convergence course. Students used still digital cameras, video cameras, digital audio recorders, cell phones, and laptop computers with both ethernet and wireless internet to report, write, and produce their work. Stories, photographs, videos, and audio slideshows focused on the impact of Panama Canal expansion on access to fresh water in two poor rural villages, and the impact of limited water supply on communities isolated from Panama City. The year before, the same course produced multimedia content about fishing conditions and the environmental status of local Biscayne Bay as well as multimedia content for a website about National Park Service careers.

From the local and overseas travels, students learn about culture and society, journalism practices, history, archaeology, politics, and other social sciences. They begin to understand the impact of globalisation on their lives. And they apply their learning to their news and feature stories. Journalism and other courses that add international travel to its curriculum become a type of “supercourse” by combining the unavoidable learning about foreign cultures, history, language, economics, and politics with the content native to the specific course.

The intellectual, psychological, cross-cultural, and personality benefits of these courses further a student’s personal growth and maturity. Global learning and personal development are one example (Braskamp, Braskamp, & Merri11, 2009). International travel encourages students to get away from their individualistic, insular, and perhaps even more isolated lives created by being born and raised in a network-computer generation of communication and education. This is a paradox, in some ways, for today’s “net generation” college students, who, research has shown, learn quite differently from the generation before them (Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005).
The Institute of International Education Research, funded by the US State Department's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, revealed a record number of students studying for university credit abroad just before the recent global economic recession. The total reached 223,534 in 2005-06, but was at 174,629 only three years earlier (Gutierrez, Bhandari & Obst, 2008; Anonymous, 2006; Gardner & Witherell, 2004). Most interesting among the numbers is the eight to ten percent growth rate. Countries hosting the most students included the United Kingdom, Italy, Spain, France, and Australia. The numbers also revealed growing interest in non-English speaking countries in Europe and Asia (Gutierrez, Bhandari & Obst, 2008; Anonymous, 2006; Gardner & Witherell, 2004).

Indeed, in a globalised world of wired communication, travel has become an essential part of student learning. This paper suggests that travel adds significant global perspectives and new story telling skills to the journalism education experience. A travel program can easily be added to existing journalism curriculum with minimal funding and faculty-administration effort. The paper provides case examples of how travel and new media can be combined to complement traditional news reporting and feature writing courses to make them extraordinary components of a journalism major regardless of whether the program has an international or multimedia-convergence emphasis.

Importance of experiential learning

Experiential learning has been discussed in the literature on education for nearly three-quarters of a century (Dewey, 1938; Dewey, 1944). This approach has its roots in professional journalism practices from a century ago in which the first journalism and mass communication education programs originated. The importance of hands-on or experiential assignments in the “real world” to the journalism education and training process is well-documented in the literature (Casey, 1976; Westmoreland, 1976; Harper, 1977; Friedlander, 1978; Kochersberger, 1984). The literature also recognize the value of laboratory newspapers, magazines, and other forms of distribution of student work (Pfaff, 1977).

Travel is not limited to reporting and writing or to multimedia-convergence skills courses. Journalism educators have often taken students on visits to newsrooms and major media centers such as New York, Los Angeles, London, or Washington (for example, see O’Keefe, 1979; Swartz, 1983). And for generations of students, professors have accompanied students to academic and professional organization meetings to enhance their classroom experiences. The core purpose of such familiarity trips, however, is often not to write or report journalistically.

Globalisation and the value of travel

The Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communication in the United States have for some time rationalised that course contents should be more global and cross-cultural in outlook. “Globalisation— and all of its ramifications— is a reality journalism and mass communication schools must address,” wrote university professors Lyle D. Olson and John E. Getz (2004). They conclude, however, that
globalisation is not widely researched, nor has it received much attention in journalism and mass communication programs.

Callahan (2003) discusses the new ethical challenges facing journalism and mass communication educators that involve globalisation. Among them, he mentions that growing global interconnection and interdependence requires universal values and ethical behaviors for journalists.

Dutch educator Mark Deuze (2001) cites globalisation as a major concern for educating today’s journalism and mass communication students. Holm (2002) points to a “forgotten globalization of journalism education” that has traditionally focused on “training people for jobs rather than educating people for life” (p. 68). Holm also notes that the process of globalisation is slow and not helped by the declining numbers of students taking foreign language courses in the United States and that very few American undergraduate students participate in study-abroad programs. Any effort to internationalise higher education, in general, he says, is hindered by financial concerns, other higher education priorities, or just a lack of interest.

He adds that “journalism education needs to break out of the national mold in which it has been traditionally cast” (p. 67). To do this, internationalization or traveling to a different country, is only the first step. “Making students understand globalisation requires a learning experience that matches the process that takes place every day in global companies where national identities are supplemented by overarching transnational identities and ways of defining problems” (p. 70).

Thus, my rationale for exposing students to the realities of wired global communities through international travel. This strategy is strengthened by the fact that college students are already spending semesters abroad, taking spring break trips to the Caribbean or Latin America, volunteering in developing nations, spending summers back-packing in Europe, and even traveling to study in Asia and Africa. Our journalism students are often involved in one or more domestic trips per semester.

The use of travel in news reporting and visual communication classes is generally limited to regional locations to keep costs under control and because assignments are often prepared for local publications. Travel in feature writing classes is different. For this course, we use both national and international travels, depending on when the course is offered. Fall and spring offerings are generally restricted to three or four day domestic trips because of time and financial limitations. Summer classes take longer international trips such as five to six weeks in Europe, Asia, and Latin America. Most courses offered fit into the traditional three-credit model for an undergraduate class that meets for about 28 sessions for 75 minutes per session. Credit and non-credit programs for overseas travel vary in that they offer students the option of either three or six credits since these are full six-week summer session courses.

Another key difference is that these courses are less structured than the regular 75-minute sessions. Instead, students may meet daily for shorter periods or less frequently for longer periods, depending on needs of the particular class session. In recent classes in Europe and Asia, for example, courses provided more professor-student contact time in group settings than the traditional three-credit course and considerably more tutorial or individual time evaluating work and discussing with students than would be expected in a typical class on our home campus.
Faculty qualifications

For effective integration of travel into a new media skills or convergence course, faculty members must be willing to travel with groups of students. Our courses in fall and spring may be as large as 16 students. Typically, two-thirds to three-quarters of the class will make a trip. For more local or regional trips, full participation is not uncommon.

It is essential to note that to introduce and teach new media and convergence skills in these courses, faculty must have writing and editing teaching skills and able to teach and use the relevant new media tools. It is critical for the professor to bring to class advanced levels of portable computer, network, web content production, audio, and video skills as well. This ability, when traveling, is often quite important to the success of a course. Invariably, professors will be called upon to solve technical problems ranging from operating system or hardware crashes of a student laptop to finding batteries or the right power supply and converting local electricity to simply connecting to a hotel or apartment’s wireless broadband service. Professors must be willing and able to teach new media while sitting in an apartment living room or in an airport waiting area instead of a well-equipped campus lab or classroom. It means tutorial-style teaching about new media, such as the fundamentals of photo editing and sizing, using a word processing program for editing, and posting stories to a web content management system database back on the home campus.

Faculty must also serve as ad hoc travel agents in arranging for air travel, local transportation, housing, and even advice about passports when needed. Faculty members leading trips with students must be effective travel planners and be willing to invest considerable effort in organizing the trip long before it occurs.

For international journalism classes, faculty should be comfortable with overseas travel. Ideally, faculty should know the local language and have lived in the country or have visited it on numerous occasions. This background and experience is irreplaceable and essential to the success of any course or travel program. Faculty members must take a leadership role during emergencies such as accidents, lost travel documents or stolen items, family deaths, and even student illnesses. It is not easy and often makes such a class a full-time endeavor and not just a 90-minute session each day. Steiner (1987) noted that faculty spend much more time with their students for these classes and must be comfortable with eating, drinking, and even sharing rooms with their students. “One caveat is worth noting: faculty must be prepared to become close to the students,” she wrote (p. 41).

Domestic travel in writing courses

Students in our program have traveled throughout Florida in reporting and photography classes; we do not always remain on campus. We have traveled to and reported about Florida state parks, American national parks, and the nearby Florida Keys region, an international tourism destination. Reporting students work on special projects for the Key West Citizen. In other reporting classes, such as our graduate journalism program (M.A. degree), students have flown more than 400 miles to the state capitol in Tallahassee and even further to Washington, D.C., to report in multimedia formats about government affairs and to cover legislative sessions. A group
of graduate journalism students helped cover the inauguration of President Barack Obama in 2009 for United Press International and other news organizations.

Similar to those in news reporting classes, students have traveled throughout South Florida in our feature writing classes during the past decade. The class occasionally helps with work for the Key West Citizen (http://keysnews.com/), but most of the work has been connected to an eight-year-old project involving the national parks of the United States titled “Our National Parks” (http://ournationalparks.us). There are three national parks and a large national wetlands preserve in South Florida and we take advantage of it. But most importantly, we have traveled outside of Florida for much of our multimedia web work. Since these are more advanced students—juniors and seniors—they are better suited for extended travel and able to produce quality content from such trips. Work on the project has also taken us to Northern California, Virginia, the U.S. Virgin Islands, Puerto Rico, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, Arizona, Nevada, New York, and Washington, D.C.
We regularly offer feature writing, general reporting, and visual communication courses in an international setting. We have recently taught travel writing and feature writing summer classes with multimedia approaches in the People’s Republic of China and Thailand (http://com.miami.edu/china) and in the Czech Republic, Germany, Slovenia, and Italy (http://viscom.miami.edu/prague/). The courses in Western and Central Europe offer strong design, web production, and photography components in combination with new media and convergence tools.

The courses emphasise on writing or graphic design-photography assignments using multimedia skills and new media tools. In feature writing and travel writing, however, we take students to locations that lend themselves to stories about arts and culture, historical and archaeological sites, people, museums, local lifestyles, activities such as shopping, nightlife, and dining, special events such as festivals, and even traditional tourist attractions. The same approach is used in Europe.

The courses also incorporate considerable interaction with local experts. In addition to class related activities, it is essential to give students time to explore. We do not

Photos above by Bruce Garrison and Cai Yan
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schedule every minute of every day. While exploring, students are also developing story ideas for their course projects. But this free time lets students pursue individual interests and objectives for the trip.

**New media and outlets for course projects**

There needs to be an outlet for the student multimedia projects. Students will produce considerable written and visual content during a course of this kind. Our courses not only develop as many as 50 feature stories per semester, but can also generate hundreds of photographs and audio and video to accompany the written stories or to stand alone. The most common outlets are websites. Another option is to work with a local commercial news organization as we do for projects in South Florida. This places the production costs and any advertising sales burden on the commercial enterprise and not on the class. This adds another layer of editorial oversight and transfers publication control to the publisher. Less expensive options are websites since these only require site development costs. This requires available web expertise and access to the school’s web server. In cases where a writing class professor does not have expertise nor have students who can provide it, the option of working with another professor’s online journalism, web design, or multimedia class should be considered. For most universities and colleges, the web outlet option seems ideal.

Regardless of whether the outlet is online or in traditional print form, there is need for common software in addition to the hardware discussed above. While students use either PC or Mac portable computers, a variety of digital still cameras, digital audio and video recorders, and cell phones, we have a common software approach. Our school, not just the new media and travel courses, have adopted certain software because of its use in the industry. Our students most often use software in the Microsoft Office suite such as Word, Microsoft’s Windows Movie Maker, or programs that are part of the Adobe Creative Suite such as Photoshop, Dreamweaver, Flash, and Illustrator, and Apple’s iMovie, Final Cut Express, and Final Cut Pro for audio-video editing.

**Academic and pedagogical benefits**

Much have been written about the positive impact of study-abroad experiences on students. One study notes the potential positive changes in a student’s maturity and self-confidence, worldviews, interests in academic activities, educational experiences, new or reinforced commitment to study foreign language, understanding of native cultural values and biases, greater diversity of daily experiences and friends, increased skill sets for professional development, and even completely new career interests (Dwyer & Peters, 2004).

The benefits outweigh the teething problems that inevitably occur in travel-based courses. Our students may initially see the course as fun, but do not see the trip or course as a vacation where they will work less or learn less. In fact, the appeal of visiting foreign places serves as motivation and a context in which students do not
always experience in ordinary class work. This translates to additional effort by the students in their reporting, writing, and other creative processes.

The travel projects also foster teamwork. Students who consider themselves primarily writers work with those who are more visually oriented such as photographers, designers, or other visual specialists. It is a valuable result for the project outcome (a limited edition magazine, a news or special project website, or special section of a newspaper). The travel-based multimedia projects also provide useful visibility to the school’s journalism or mass communication program by publishing (and identifying ourselves) in print or on the web.

Writers work together to share sources and other resources during the newsgathering process. Often this is something as simple as sharing a taxi or a translator while reporting or photographing. And they may share internet access, laptops, cell phones, digital still and video cameras, digital voice recorders, and other computing resources. Since they are expected to provide photographs and audio-video with their stories, they take photographs and record for one another when necessary. Working in teams is safer too in foreign countries.

Students learn to report under adverse conditions, for instance, where they do not speak the local language and do not know their way around a city. They must report and write in unfamiliar settings such as hotel rooms or even on trains and buses. Thus, students learn to be resourceful and more independent than usual. While circumstances are less difficult when traveling in the United States, students learn from these situations and quickly develop confidence in their abilities in meeting deadlines and industry standard articles.

Small publications such as small-town dailies and larger weeklies appreciate the students’ contributions because it creates quality content for them at a comparatively low price. And students like it because they get “clips” and other long-term benefits from a class project.

Students also have the chance to work closely with their project leader—professors. They can see how they work since there is ample opportunity to edit with the student present. Similarly, it also gives professors the chance to see their students working in the field—conducting interviews, shooting photographs, making phone calls, conducting background research, exploring for ideas, and simply working with others in a team context. “Field work requires them (students) to work together to accommodate mutual needs and to cooperate in meeting significant professional as well as personal and interpersonal challenges,” noted Steiner (1987).

**Educational challenges**

Travel costs a lot of money. It is not easy for universities today to raise funds to travel to Asia, South America, Europe, or sometimes even to locations near a campus. We obtain the needed funding in two ways. First, we try to cover expenses with support from the publications for which we produce content. For example, we were able to pay our travel expenses for trips to the Florida Keys through funding by the daily *Key West Citizen*. The newspaper pays us out of its freelance budget. We also look for some outside sources for funding such as foundations or similar organizations. And our
Faculty members have recently obtained funding from the private Special Olympics and the federal National Park Service. There may be other groups providing funding and the effort to find them would be worthwhile.

Second, the arrangement for internal funding, in our case, is a variation of the matching-grant approach. Our school funding pays for hotel, some admission fees, and local transportation expenses (such as rental cars and airport transfers) but our students must pay for airfare and their own food and entertainment. We also have a policy to include, not exclude, if students want to participate but cannot afford to do so. In cases where a student cannot buy an airplane ticket, we try to fund it.

Group size is a problem if a class is allowed to become large in order to balance a budget. Basic group movement and activity logistics become difficult. For example, it is not always easy for a group of 20 to 30 students to travel from place to place or to enter a restaurant and expect to be seated together. And it makes getting around more complicated. Smaller groups work much better for skills-based mass communication classes.

These courses take time, much more time than many home campus courses. Travel itself requires additional time. Faculty must make time for it in busy schedules. Even for home-campus courses that incorporate a three or four-day trip, there will be problems. Not all students like to travel. Some students will have conflicts arising from work, family, and other classes that sometimes cannot be resolved.

Careless students sometimes can create difficulties (but most do not). Students lose passports, air tickets, purses, and even entire suitcases. As inexperienced travelers, they can be vulnerable to personal safety risks. They can be homesick about being separated from loved ones for long periods of time or about being taken out of their comfort zones, not eating favorite foods, and even troubled by minor illnesses. Some students experience culture shock. Carefully screening students for their reporting and writing experience and aptitude for travels can mitigate these problems. Screening, filing required administrative paperwork (e.g., course listings, risk management, health), creating promotional materials, and fulfilling various institutional travel policies take additional time.

There are often hidden costs for students and faculty. These include research and teaching materials, admission fees for attractions, guidebooks, visas, ground transportation, cell phone time, online access at many hotels, laptop computer and digital camera gear, batteries, storage media, international and national long distance, souvenirs, and excess or overweight baggage fees—to mention only a few examples.

**Conclusion**

Success for domestic travel and international travel in courses implementing new media and convergence approaches is contingent on the level of planning and the foundation of a strong course project or theme. For integration of travel into existing courses at a domestic level, these factors will enhance chances of success:

1. A strong new media project idea to motivate student participation and effort.
2. There must be significant faculty interest in the project.
3. Partial or full funding for student and faculty expenses for shorter national or regional trips.

4. Administrative and faculty support.

5. The project must satisfy course assignment requirements and student skill development needs.

6. The project should be appropriately timed. For instance, travel works well for final projects or semester-end assignments.

7. Schools should be prepared to provide, on loan, needed new media and multimedia resources (such as Internet access, digital still and video cameras, digital audio recorders, production software, Web servers, and other equipment) needed by students for field work.

International programs require even more from institutions, faculty, and students. The elements for success include:

1. There must be a workable plan or strategy for an entire international journalism course, especially those utilizing new media. Basic support needs must be met and the plan should fit within a bigger context such as an international or global studies program or a new media program.

2. There must be strong administrative support at department, school and university level for internationalisation of journalism programs.

3. Faculty interest in overseas travel and teaching must be high. Faculty should self-select into the program. Similarly, faculty leadership is expected and required in the program’s conception, recruiting, and execution.

4. The international course must meet students’ academic needs. It should be acceptable for major requirements or electives, for example. For non-majors, it should count as electives or general studies requirements credits.

5. Adequate institutional and departmental funding must be available to administer and promote programs as well as to pay for the course itself.

6. Student funding should be acquired and distributed as needed to eligible students.

7. There must be a core group of students in the department or school with financial resources to travel abroad and with the new media tools and skills to meet minimum course needs.

8. The course should be offered when it is not in conflict with other aspects of the students’ and faculty member’s schedules. This is commonly during summer or intersession periods. Longer periods for fall and spring seem feasible, but would require an even greater commitment by all groups involved.

9. There should be a general global view and a desire to enhance student information and computer technology literacy in the host school and on campus in general. This means a campus-wide positive attitude about the study of international and global issues and a fundamental interest in overseas study among students as well as an environment that supports and encourages use of new media technologies.
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References


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