

Old Wine in New Bottles: Teaching Journalism from the Ground Up

By Professor Steven R. Knowlton, Ph.D., Dublin City University

Email: steven.knowlton@dcu.ie

The fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 got many Western universities, NGOs and governments interested in journalism education programs for the former Communist nations and other developing countries. The rationale, of course, is that a nation cannot function as a democracy without a free press. In a democracy, we all know, the people hold the sovereign power, but they need good sources of information to wield that power wisely – and good sources of information can be scarce on the ground in fledgling democracies and authoritarian nations.

One might think that there is plenty of journalism education out there, even in developing nations. The latest results available on the World Journalism Education Council's Web site [<http://wjec.ou.edu/>] for the World Journalism Education Census show 2,833 journalism education programs worldwide. Most are in the developed world; Africa, for example, has only 10 percent of them. But at the council's conference in June 2007, Charles Self, the president of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, said: "The number of programs in China, India, Russia, and Brazil especially seem to be growing rapidly." He went on, however, to point out the limitations of looking at numbers alone: "Difficulties in assessing the quality of these programs make it urgent that a worldwide dialogue about the principles of journalism education and basic data about how journalism is being taught be undertaken." [http://wjec.ou.edu/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=31&Itemid=26]

As part of such a dialogue, I'd like to present a case study that I hope will make you think of community journalism – a responsive, and even participatory, kind of journalism – as an approach that can be fruitfully taught in developing countries where journalism is still struggling for a foothold.

One strategy for teaching journalism in the developing world has been to send aspiring or practicing journalists to the West to study journalism. For such students, English language skills can be a limiting factor, keeping students in theory classes and out of writing classes. But this strategy can certainly help transplant Western ideas about how journalism should be practiced into developing nations, albeit slowly, one student at a time. Another teaching strategy is to use journalism educators as coaches who travel from one news media outlet to another to offer advice to the staffs and managers.

My experiences come from teaching in Eastern Europe, in Moldova and Romania. My wife, Karen Freeman, and I have done workshops and taught entire university courses in both countries. We spent seven months in Moldova as Knight International Fellows, setting up the School of Advanced Journalism in Chisinau, a freestanding, master's level certificate program run by the Independent Journalism Center.

When teaching abroad, we have generally taken the American (or Western) journalism curriculum and adapted it to accommodate such hurdles as teaching through a translator and teaching without adequate equipment, so that's what we did in designing the curriculum for the new School of Advanced Journalism in Chisinau and helping to teach it. After all, we were trying to bring these students into the 21st-century mainstream, in the hope that they and others like them would bring their country along.

But we ran into a problem much greater than just having to teach through a translator in Moldova: writing in a Western style was foreign indeed in a culture where subjects are approached as you would approach a mountain peak: many zigs and zags and circles around the mountain before getting to the point. These people have time. While they are making the transition from communism, they have not bought into Western stresses. They put family and friends ahead of anything else, and they do not see any reason to rush. We were dealing with students who wrote in Romanian or Russian. Romanian is the language of Romanians and of most Moldovans, while many Moldovans of Ukrainian or Russian origins speak and write primarily in Russian. The Romanian language takes much longer to convey a piece of information than English does, and Russian can take even longer. While Romanians and Moldovans can be taught to be more concise, it is an unnatural style for them.

We are not the only ones to notice this cultural problem. On its Web site (www.iwpr.net), the Institute for War & Peace Reporting acknowledges this issue, but proceeds to prescribe a very Western style of journalism for its contributors in developing nations. Its advice to Balkan journalists sounds accommodating: "It should be stressed that IWPR does not seek to impose a western journalistic template on the work of collaborators. The regional voice has a rich, vibrant and compelling timbre, which is both refreshing and unique. The aim is to introduce journalists across the Balkans to the tenets of the western style – clarity, conciseness, balance and accuracy of fact – and urge the participant to draw her or his own lessons from the different editorial experience."

When IWPR lays out its writing guidelines, however, it is more insistent: "We are well aware that this structure based on strong leads is may appear quite contrary to some regional styles, where a conclusion or punch-line is kept for the end. Again, we are not trying to judge the merits of local cultural styles, but the strong lead is undoubtedly an essential component of international journalism, helping your articles reach a wider audience."

The IWPR guidelines are also tenets that would be part of any Western curriculum. Here are a few of them:

- News analysis pieces are based on a timely element. We usually refer in the first or second paragraph to WHEN an event has occurred.
- These pieces must strive for objectivity. There should be no personal opinion; items reported must be facts and facts must be credited to sources. Analysis and analytical conclusions should be based on these facts, and ideally credited to quoted sources.

· News analysis pieces are written in the third person. No reference to the author should be made. “Sources tell IWPR,” not “they told me.”

The journalism curriculums outlined in the “Model Curricula for Journalism Education for Developing Countries & Emerging Democracies” (the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2007) incorporate a novel approach in their Foundations of Journalism courses. These courses would be useful anywhere, but will be particularly appropriate in countries shaking off totalitarian or authoritarian regimes because they teach critical thinking skills and logic, and present in-depth analyses of the political, social, economic, legal and cultural landscape of the students’ country. But their Reporting and Writing courses sound familiar to Western teachers.

Very often, “international journalism” and “Western journalism” are used as if they were synonyms. The jury is still out, however, on whether quality journalism outside the West will be close to a carbon copy of quality journalism within it. I don’t think it should be – or, at least, quality journalism outside the West shouldn’t be expected to look like that anytime soon. And it certainly doesn’t look like that now.

Two recent news articles show a different approach to news writing. The first is an article published on July 15 in Nine O’Clock, a good English-language newspaper (both print and online) in Romania:

“Yesterday the meteorologists warned the authorities in 16 Counties in northern Romania that Transylvania, Maramures and the northern areas of Moldavia will register thunderstorms and torrential rains today.

The meteorologists expect that these areas will register ‘significant’ rainfalls and thunderstorms during a 20-hour period set to start early Tuesday morning.

‘In the aforementioned period torrential rains, lightning, wind gusts, storms and hailstone will sweep through Maramures, Transylvania and the northern and western regions of Moldova. The rainfall quantities will surpass 25 liters per square meter and in isolated areas, especially at the mountainside, 40 to 45 liters per square meter,’ meteorologists warn.”

As you can see, readers had to wait until the last paragraph to find out that anyone in northwestern Romania had better stay out of mountain gorges because the heavens were about to open up. A similar strategy was used in a long investigative article on airline service in Moldova that was published on July 29, 2007, in Moldova Azi, which is published online in Romanian, Russian and English. Here it is, truncated:

The poorest country in Europe with the highest prices for air transport – this is how the present situation on the Moldovan air service market looks like. While independent experts affirm that the national aviation is a lost cause, the state intensely protects the state air company, blocking the access of foreign European operators.

...

In fact, say the specialists, it is the newly created Agency for Competition Protection that should bring order onto the market both with regard to airport fees and the case of the monopoly. Deputy Director of SCAA, Eugen Dvornic, agrees: "AirMoldova transports over a half of the passenger flow. What's bad about it? In the end, the Agency for Competition Protection should clarify this for itself. Other companies have the full right to file complaints", he told us.

And other companies do not have the experience of addressing to such institutions. The National Agency for Competition Protection has been formed early in the beginning of this year and its working mechanisms are not yet fully rooted in the Republic of Moldova.

Again, a Western journalist would have put the potential solution to the airline problem in the lead and would have built the article around it.

The airline article was written by one of our best Moldovan students, who obviously did not leave 10 months of intense training with the concept of a lead burned indelibly into her mind. So did the program fail, and did she fail?

Perhaps, but teaching in Eastern Europe has taught me that it is foolish to march in and expect to train Western-style journalists. As part of their preparation, journalism teachers should be told to set priorities: which parts of the Western approach to journalism are the most important to convey?

In Moldova, Romania and other post-communist countries, telling the truth is not valued as highly as in the West. Our students have raised their eyebrows at the idea of journalists who tell the truth above all else because they have grown up steeped in cynicism. And it does no good to present Western journalists as paragons of integrity. If I had been teaching in Eastern Europe last week, I would have told my students about how Ron Fournier, now the acting chief of the Associated Press's Washington Bureau, urged on Karl Rove, who was a top strategist for President George Bush, while writing about a soldier who had been killed in Afghanistan. A Congressional report cited by Mother Jones magazine exposed the April 2004 email note, saying: "In response to Mr. Fournier's e-mail, Mr. Rove asked, "How does our country continue to produce men and women like this," to which Mr. Fournier replied: "The Lord creates men and women like this all over the world. But only the great and free countries allow them to flourish. Keep up the fight."

I would have told the students about how a prominent Western journalist stepped over the line to encourage Karl Rove because I would want them to know that in the West, conduct like that is exposed and criticized. If we try to hold ourselves up as ethical exemplars, we will only increase the students' cynicism. We want to hold up honesty as a trait worth striving for, and show how much it is valued.

So honesty should be one piece of the Western ethos to try to pass along. Others are balance, impartiality and accuracy. I would be happy to be help students understand those concepts and take them as their own. “Accuracy” supports “honesty” – if a reporter is wrong about something, the reader may dismiss the error as sloppiness or as dishonesty. And that is no way to build readers’ trust. “Balance” is just another way to say fairness, and the students come from places where many things are not fair. They are not accustomed to seeing impartiality on the part of the press, either, because most news outlets are supported by political or business sources, and corruption between sources and poorly paid reporters is common. Many students bribe teachers for grades, so you can’t even trust academic transcripts, and academic dishonesty is something that teachers have to deal with.

That shouldn’t mean that balance and impartiality will be impossible in Romania and Moldova. After all, The Wall Street Journal does not try to hide the conservative politics of its editorial page, but its reporters cover the news in a balanced and impartial way. The key is transparency, and a commitment to be fair.

Such values are indeed universal among journalists and educators: Here is what the Institute for War and Peace Reporting says on its Web site:

“Balance is essential. If you quote a source putting forward one opinion, there must be an opposing view put forward by another source. The objectivity of an article will be put into question if only one view is put forward by people interviewed.

Accuracy is essential if the articles is [sic] to be taken seriously. Any claim must be backed up, any accusation followed up. Follow the ‘two-source’ rule, especially for controversial information.”

And in a reporting handbook, IWPR says, “Nearly every code of ethics agrees on at least three fundamental factors in the practice of journalism: impartiality, accuracy and fairness. These can be considered universal standards.” [Colin Bickler et. al., eds., “Reporting for Change: A Handbook for Local Journalists in Crisis Areas,”p. 25, Institute for War & Peace Reporting, London, 2004.]

So if I had those first courses for the School of Advanced Journalism in Chisinau to do over, I would not put as much emphasis on the Western structure for news articles. And I wouldn’t focus on keeping students from backing into their stories. Would I worry about students’ slipping in some first-person pronouns? Not much. Instead, I would take some of that time and energy and put it into teaching honesty, balance, impartiality and accuracy.

But that would still leave me with 18 students who doubted that Western journalism really behaved the way the books and teachers said, and who were sure that honest journalism would never come to Moldova. That’s the situation my wife and I faced after the first few months the new school was in operation. It shouldn’t have been surprising: the students live in a country where the news media are not valued. They are seen as the

mouthpieces of the government or of political parties or other vested interests, and they seem remote from ordinary people. That's when we decided to teach a unit on community journalism.

During our months in Moldova, Karen Freeman and I had noticed that people did not seem to have a personal relationship with a newspaper – no one thought of a paper as “my paper.” So the idea of community journalism itself seemed to offer something Moldova needed: the kind of journalism that gets many voices into the paper and makes democracy work on a small scale. After all, the United States didn't start with papers like The New York Times; it began with neighborhood or regional papers, and those small community papers are still doing well. Community journalism is intensely local and interactive, and we wanted to see what our students would do with it.

We decided to use “Community Journalism: Relentlessly Local,” by Jock Lauterer, as a textbook. It has a lot of practical, accessible examples applicable to journalism in general. The students who were best at English translated chapters of the textbook for the other students to read.

So the goal for the course was to test the community journalism concept and see whether it resonated for Moldovans. It was also to make the students write a lot, report in the field a lot and work as part of a team. Every morning started with lead-writing exercises and an ethics discussion. On the first day of class, when many students wandered in late, we essentially told the students that play time was over. We said we had heard that many students had stopped being on time for classes and assignments, were sometimes disruptive, and, worst of all, had a problem with honesty. Now, we said, there would be no excuses. We then had no discipline problems for this course.

In fact, this course was a highlight of my teaching career. We divided the students into two newspaper staffs, one for the Centru neighborhood and one for Botanica. We picked the students for the top staff positions, choosing students who could communicate easily in English. One editor, however, was reluctant to exercise authority, and at the very first staff meeting, another student – who until that point had not been very assertive – picked up the reins and showed great leadership potential. So she and the original editor agreed to switch jobs. The students enthusiastically organized themselves and came up with an ambitious set of stories and photos to pursue. Even though public transportation is cheap in Moldova, it's not cheap on a student budget. So we paid for the students' extra transportation and telephone needs out of our own pockets.

After the early morning teaching each day, we sat in on staff meetings and worked with individual students on projects for the rest of the day. The students were initially hesitant about talking to ordinary people – that's not commonly done in Moldova. And they were defeatist about the prospects of getting government officials to talk to them. But when they tried, the students were surprised and pleased to see how easy it was to get ordinary people to tell them about their problems and joys. They did in fact often run into officials who gave them a hard time. But they didn't give up – with advice from my wife and myself, the students persevered, and held officials accountable.

Both papers carried both Romanian- and Russian-language articles, and languages carry political connotations and resentments in Moldova. That caused a bit of a squall, when the editor of the Botanica paper announced that as a Moldovan patriot, she wasn't putting any Russian-language articles on the front page of her paper. It proved to be a good teaching moment, a time to talk about the need for a good relationship between the Romanian- and Russian-language press in Moldova, and the editor relented. Every article was edited by the student staff, and I or my wife went over each article in great detail with a translator. Most reporters had to go back into the field at least once to get more material for their articles, and they all had rewriting to do.

Here's a sampling of the stories that the students dug up themselves, with no suggestions from the faculty beyond general guidelines about the sorts of stories to look for:

- A student came back with a story about an aging actor, down on his luck and in ill health, who, in his day, had been considered the finest interpreter of Mihai Eminescu, the great Romantic poet. He had played many of Eminescu's characters on the stage and played Eminescu himself, both to rave reviews, but now was old and sick and, like most everyone else in Moldova, broke. The management of the Eminescu Theatre in downtown Chisinau had taken pity on the actor and allowed him to live in the theatre.
- A cobblestone street was so empty and so dark that women walked it in fear and tried to light their path with the glow from their cellphones. There had been several turned ankles and at least one mugging in recent months.
- An apartment house overlooking a soccer stadium filled every game day with fans who beat the ticket price by watching the match from the balconies of the apartments. They got rowdy, left drink bottles and cans, and occasionally picked fights with the tenants.
- A local manmade lake needed to be drained and cleaned. The method urged by the president's office was so antiquated and inefficient that the project cost 20 times as much as it needed to. This was a teaching moment: A baby step toward full democratic watchdog journalism came when the reporter on the story, at our insistence, called the office of President Vladimir Veronin for comment. The president had no comment, but it was the first time in memory that any reporter had asked.
- A busy street had no stoplight or sign to stop traffic so pedestrians could safely cross, and there had been fatalities. The reporter discovered that the owners of the nearby shopping center had not only complained about the dangers of the busy street, but had offered to pay for a traffic light. Bureaucrats in two government agencies each passed the buck onto the other. At our urging, the reporter on the story called both bureaucrats' bosses and got a ruling on whose job it was to install the light. No one had ever heard of pursuing government accountability that way; the universal assumption in Moldova is that no government official will do anything unless bribed to do so. Imagine the students' surprise when a traffic light was installed.

The Botanica staff decided – on closing day! – to use a photograph on the paper’s nameplate. No, we told them, you can’t find a photograph on the Internet and just take it. And no, there was no time to send a photographer out to the site by public transportation to take a picture and bring it back. That would take hours.

Then Svetlana Nejelscia disappeared down the hall of the center that housed the computer lab and came back in moments with one of the center’s cleaning women, still wearing her green apron and carrying a bucket of cleaning supplies. She was, Svetlana explained, an artist, and, indeed, the young woman produced in 20 minutes a wonderful pencil drawing for the newspaper’s nameplate.

While other students scanned the drawing and wrote in the artist’s name as a credit line, my wife and I were stunned. “Where did you find her?” we stammered in astonishment. “How did you know one of the cleaning ladies could draw like that?”

Svetlana’s smile made the whole project, if nothing else had. “I’m a reporter,” she said. “It’s my job to know things like that.”

That’s the sort of confidence and faith in both self and system that community journalism can build. It is not possible for a single reporter, or even a group of reporters, to fix corruption at the highest level or to make an honest court system overnight. But a couple of journalists can get a stoplight installed and a school painted.

Reporters and editors for metro dailies occasionally scoff at community papers, a place for rookies on the way up, they think, or a soft landing for the exhausted on the way back down. The career ladder is generally a series of steps to ever-larger papers – from weekly to small daily, progressing to metro daily and finally on to the great institutions such as the Washington Post or the New York Times. And in a way, that’s true in the United States, two-plus centuries after the nation’s founding. But 15 years after independence, newspaper circulations in Moldova are counted in the hundreds, not the hundreds of thousands. And that is precisely how long it has been since the Soviet Union fell apart and the whole Eastern bloc had the chance to enter the democratic world

It makes sense to begin journalism in Moldova or Romania, or Bosnia or Albania, where it began in the American colonies: with small-circulation newspapers covering communities at the most local level. One very important factor is that dishonesty, corruption and sloppiness are harder to get away with on a small publication, where the community is watching and vocal. Small papers can often change technology more quickly than larger ones, and the interactivity made possible by the Web is terrific for community journalism. Online letters? You have space to run all of them. Garden and chess blogs from readers? No problem. Need to tell people how to file for tax refunds? With the Web, you can tell them how and give them the Web links they need. Convergence? Community journalism reporters have long been used to carrying a camera. Now that camera can take video shots as well, and the reporter can become an online video reporter as well as a writer.

How easily community journalism blends with new media technologies can be seen in the account of a workshop that Transitions Online held in December 2007 for 20 journalists and journalism students from the Czech Republic and Slovakia. I don't know if TOL thought about the community journalism implications, but its Web site described what sounds like a community journalism workshop to me: "The main part of the program focused on new media, with lectures about Internet TV, 'crowdsourcing' (crowdsourcing is a type of collaborative journalism, offering cooperation between citizen reports and professional journalists), networked journalism, and hyper-local content." [www.tol.cz Training page.]

This kind of Web interactivity is being promoted by many of those who think about journalism education. For example, Ellen Hume of the University of Massachusetts, writing about the first World Journalism Education Conference, held in 2007, sees innovation based on the Web as a way to give students in developing nations the journalism instruction they may not be getting at their universities. She said: "Pedagogy needs to catch up with the new media technologies and adapt some of its interactivity and peer-to-peer features. Some changes proposed at the WJEC were the opposite of the norm for journalism education in many universities, where lecturers often expound on theory without engaging the students." [http://www.ned.org/cima/reports.html p 24 of "University Global Education: A Global Challenge"; A Report to the Center for International Media Assistance, a project of the National Endowment for Democracy, by Ellen Hume of the University of Massachusetts Boston]

In the end, each team of 10 students in Chisinau put out a six-page broadsheet of stories and photographs of journalism at its most intimate, most local. (The papers are posted online at scoaladejournalism.md/comunitar/index.php.) The editor and managing editor of the Centru neighborhood paper insisted on publishing a "Who we are" editorial, which reads:

"We are sure you have never seen such a thing. Neither have we ... until we became students with the School of Advanced Studies in Journalism." And then the editorial went on to demonstrate that the students had grasped the point of the course:

"We have learned how important it is for a locality that journalists keep an ear out for the happiness and sorrows of their block neighbors, how glad parents are to see the photos of their children on the newspaper pages, how pleased people are when their personal problems are taken into account."

The class project showed the students what going to the grass-roots really means. One student, Mariana Dron, told us after the class that she realized she had been doing things backward at the weekly paper where she worked. Her paper, she said, talked to government officials about public affairs and then might ask a few citizens their opinion. But she had learned that as a reporter, she should begin with the citizens, then take their concerns to the public officials. Just the way she learned it in community journalism class.

The enthusiasm of the students indicates to me that there is a place for community journalism in Moldova and Romania, and probably in other developing countries as well. Even though the papers took an enormous amount of work – 8 a.m. to 11 p.m. days, fueled by potato chips and soda, were not unusual – at the end of the course, the students asked my wife and I to come back to Moldova so they could do another community journalism segment and publish a second edition of their newspapers. Our fellowships were ending, but we found a little travel money and returned before Easter for two more weeks – how could we say no?

After more than two generations of Soviet rule, Moldova's standard of living plummeted with independence, and it has been left with a long list of problems: deep poverty, systemic corruption, widespread emigration, a crumbling infrastructure and many more. But none of those problems are harder to overcome than the Moldovans' sense of defeat and helplessness, a belief that nobody knows, nobody cares and nobody will try to fix the problems.

A weekly paper that's hip-deep and more in the community, exulting in its successes, grieving at its failures and cherishing its citizens, could go a long way toward overcoming that sense of impotence. Community journalism has a chance of giving ordinary Moldovans the confidence to become active at the local level, something that will have to happen before democracy really takes hold on the regional and national levels.

It is also a style of journalism that resonated with the students at the Chisinau school because that style is compatible with Moldovan culture, a culture that values family and friends, the home village, the neighbors. Other developing nations also value such things. So I am sharing my experiences with you today in the hope that more instructors in the developing world will consider teaching the community journalism model. That doesn't mean metropolitan-scale journalism shouldn't be taught, but fiercely local journalism that is loyal to its readers is a way to whet people's appetite for other kinds of reporting.

After we taught in Chisinau, many students said they had a new confidence in their own abilities and a new optimism about the possibilities for journalism in Moldova. So when we were in Iasi, Romania, a few weeks later, we decided to try out the community journalism concept in a workshop. Initially, the students were doubtful that it had much to offer. But they had changed their minds by the end of the workshop; one student said learning about community journalism had "restored her faith in journalism." It doesn't get much better than that.