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Carol Fletcher

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Going Mobile With Student Magazines

Carol Fletcher, Hofstra University
Carol.T.Fletcher@hofstra.edu

At a journalism department retreat in fall 2010, Staci Baird, then a tech adviser to student publications at San Francisco State University, broached the idea of creating an iPad app for the student magazine.

"I don't know how to do it," she admitted, "but we're in Silicon Valley, and it's time to get on board."

The faculty was game. The challenge was getting the students to buy in.

"When I was first named editor-in-chief, it was scary," recalled Grace Dulce, then a senior. "To be honest, I didn't even own an iPad."

It was surprisingly difficult to pry students from print.

"Students had to be convinced that interactivity was a good thing," said Beth Renneisen, an Adobe developer and instructor for the iPad project. "We had to teach them not just how to do it but, most importantly, why."

The department purchased a couple of tablets. As students began checking out apps from *Vibe* and other magazines and brainstorming interactive possibilities for their own publication, enthusiasm grew.

"Think outside the text," journalism professor Don Menn told his magazine class, and they did—shooting videos, recording interviews, and assembling timelines for their stories. Renneisen scrambled to master and teach students a beta version of Adobe software for creating apps.

"We kind of rode the plane as we were building it," Dulce said.

By the end of the semester, students were putting in 12- and 15-hour days to complete *Xpress Mag*, a free app. Renneisen helped navigate the strict requirements for getting the app on the iTunes store. *Xpress Mag* rivals many of its commercial counterparts in creativity and technical sophistication.

Carol Fletcher is an associate professor in the Department of Journalism, Media Studies, and Public Relations at Hofstra University, where she advises the student magazine, Pulse. She is a former head of the AEJMC Magazine Division.

“We’re really proud,” Dulce said. “It was a good experience and a good résumé builder.”

Intrepid spirits

Indeed, at the growing number of journalism programs experimenting with apps, students are finding that the experience can be a big job-hunting asset. At Abilene Christian University the student who was editor of *The Optimist* when it became an iPad app was subsequently hired by the tablet-only newspaper *The Daily*. At Syracuse University a student editor of the iPad magazine *Barcode: A Gentleman’s Guide to Drinking in Style* is now a paid intern at *Wired*.

Like the major magazine houses, journalism programs are trying different approaches to entering the mobile marketplace. Some are producing magazine apps with off-the-shelf tools like Mag+ (*Popular Science*) or Adobe’s Digital Publishing Suite (Condé Nast’s platform of choice for its tablet magazines, such as *Wired* and *The New Yorker*). Other schools are contracting with developers for custom apps or relying on students to do the coding.

Although the approaches vary, the goal tends to be the same: to find an affordable way for students to experiment with mobile technology without spending all their time learning software rather than practicing journalism. Success often hinges on a willingness to cooperate across disciplines, tolerance for a bit of chaos, and the courage to take the first step.

“My advice is to jump in—in whatever way you can,” said journalism professor John Fennell at the University of Missouri, where students recently created five prototype magazine apps. “You can figure it out as you go along.”

Here is a small sample of schools that have jumped on board:

University of Oregon

Ed Madison, a graduate teaching fellow at the University Oregon, created an iPad course last year in which students produced the tablet-only *OR Magazine*. Enrollment in the course, by invitation only, included 15 graduate and undergraduate journalism students with concentrations ranging from writing to videography and photojournalism, as well as a couple of advertising students.

The students created their magazine app using the latest version of InDesign, CS 5.5, which allows designers to add rich media and high levels of interactivity to page layouts, including the ability to pinch and zoom, swipe through slide shows, view 360-degree panoramas, and touch-activate interactive maps. The InDesign files were then uploaded to Adobe’s new Digital Publishing Suite for packaging for the mobile marketplace.

Madison said students picked up the Adobe software quickly. He invited many guests to the class (by Skype or in person) to lend students design and technical guidance. Over the course of the semester, guests included an iPad designer for *The New York Times*, app developers from the Portland area, an advertising professor at the university who was a wiz at InDesign, and an in-house designer for an ad agency whom Madison had found on the Internet.

“The students were really motivated,” Madison said. “The last week and a half, they were living in the lab.” The final product, *OR Magazine*, is a strikingly professional, witty iPad magazine that delivers the sort of immersive experience that helps account for the loyal following of some print publications.

OR Magazine is housed within an app that includes all of UO’s School of Journalism and Communication publications. The app will be available on iTunes by the end of the year. In the meantime, a video about the iPad project can be found on YouTube by searching “SOJC – Mobile Media Production – Spring 2011 – OR Magazine.”

University of Missouri

For the past six years, Missouri journalism professor John Fennell has taught a capstone magazine course in which students produce publications in consultation with editors from Meredith Corp. (publishers of *Better Homes and Gardens*, *Ladies’ Home Journal*, and other magazines). At the beginning of each semester, students pitch ideas for niche publications in what they believe are untapped markets, and Meredith editors provide feedback. Students take the most promising ideas and create print and online publications, which are presented to Meredith at the end of the semester.

Last year the class also produced magazine apps for Meredith’s review. The apps were developed in conjunction with two other classes—a capstone design class and a new class called Magazines Across Platforms—which took a bit of coordination. “There was some confusion and a lot of energy involved,” Fennell said.

In part to inspire and inform students and faculty, Fennell organized a conference, iPads: The Creative Process in Process. Designers and editors from *Men’s Health*, *Wired*, *National Geographic*, *ESPN*, and other publications shared their thinking about designing for the tablet. (To view the conference, go to rjionline.org/events/ipads-creative-process-process-recorded-sessions.) “Everybody is experimenting with what will work and what will make money,” Fennell said. “Ideas range from taking the entire publication onto the iPad to using the iPad as an added revenue stream with apps like *Men’s Health’s 1000 Exercises*.”

To build their apps, Missouri students used Mag+ software donated by the Bonnier Corp. (*Outdoor Life*, *Parenting*, etc.), whose executives also provided some training. “I think

they were interested in what would happen if you threw this stuff at some 20-year-olds—what the students would come up with,” Fennell said.

Mag+ is built around a plug-in for InDesign that allows a designer to add interactivity, rich media, and rotation capabilities to layouts. Unlike the comparable Adobe tools, Mag+ doesn’t require the user to create separate horizontal and vertical layouts. The vendor claims on its website that “Anyone familiar with InDesign can make beautiful Mag+ pages within an hour of first seeing the tool.”

Apps created with Mag+ (see *Popular Science*, for instance) look different from those built with Adobe’s Digital Publishing Suite (such as *Wired*), although the look with any software depends in part on the designer’s ability to tweak the software creatively to do what he or she wants.

The Mag+ pricing scheme is also different from Adobe’s. Adobe charges for its software upfront, whereas Mag+ allows users to download the production suite and preview apps on a personal iPad for free. But to package the final product into an app that can be delivered to the iTunes store, Mag+ charges a one-time fee of \$199 for a single issue, or \$2,500 for multiple issues in an in-app store, with ongoing charges to continue publishing after five months.

“Mag + allowed us to jump in fast in a way we could afford,” Fennell said. His students helped produce five demo apps for Meredith.

In addition, Missouri magazine students have produced an app about homecoming, *MU Homecoming: 100 Years in Photos*, available free on iTunes.

Drake University

When journalism professor Jeff Inman convinced his capstone magazine class to abandon its well-known print publication in favor of an app, he decided to farm out the production to the tech firm Texterity and focus the course on the problem of marketing the app. (Inman’s article on the experience, “Digitized: How a Magazine Capstone Class Abandoned Print and Ended up with an App,” in the Spring 2011 issue of *Magazine Matter*, was the catalyst for this article.)

Basically, Inman’s class provided Texterity with some 300 PDFs with embedded links, and Texterity converted these to both a digital magazine (urbanplainsmag.com) and a branded iPad app (*Urban Plains*, free on iTunes). Inman estimates the total cost at \$5,000—and, of course, there was no printer’s bill.

The students concentrated on marketing *Urban Plains* to eight metropolitan areas in the Midwest through blogs, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and other social media. Ultimately, they succeeded in attracting 2,000 unique visitors in the first two weeks.

Abilene Christian University

Every freshman who enrolls at Abilene Christian receives an iPhone. Faculty members regularly use smart phones in their classes. The school prides itself on its campus-wide Mobile Learning Initiative.

“So when we heard that the iPad would be coming out and that it would be app-based like the iPhone, we decided to set a challenge for ourselves: to create an app in the time it took the iPad to ship,” said journalism professor Kenneth Pybus.

A team of faculty members from the School of Information Technology, the Department of Art and Design, and the Department of Journalism and Mass Communication handpicked about a dozen students to work on the project in a class called Interactive Media.

The journalism students provided content for the app. The fine arts students laid it out using InDesign. The IT students did the programming; several had already taken a course in writing iPhone apps and had access to Apple’s app development program.

Two months later—and only two days after the iPad app store opened—the *ACU Optimist* was available free on iTunes.

The app has little in the way of bells and whistles, and this was a conscious choice on the team’s part. The students wanted an app that wouldn’t require a lot of ongoing labor to maintain. Their app automatically updates by drawing content from the campus newspaper website. “We didn’t want to create a monster that we couldn’t keep up,” Pybus said. “We had grand plans at the beginning, but we quickly learned we can’t do everything.”

Although the *Optimist* provides campus news, the students understood from the beginning that the app was more an educational exercise than a means of getting information out to the student body, since only about two dozen of the school’s 4,000 students owned iPads.

The most valuable part of the project, Pybus said, was that “it trained students to work with different departments and with students not like themselves.”

Syracuse University

At the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications, undergraduate journalism major Caitlin Dewey teamed up with a student programmer and a designer to produce a mobile app for an arts magazine they called *Salt*. Dewey wasn’t interested in producing a native app, usable on only one type of tablet and available only from an app store. She and her team built a Web-based app, accessed through a browser rather than an app store and functional across mobile devices.

“At first, media companies all jumped on native apps, but recently some publications, like the *Financial Times*, are trying the Web-based route,” Dewey said. “So we were kind of on the forefront.”

Brian Dawson, a double major in journalism and computer science, coded the custom app in HTML5. The magazine *Salt* can be found at saltsyracuse.com

Elsewhere on campus, an intensive summer graduate journalism class developed a native app for an iPad magazine, *Barcode: A Gentlemen's Guide to Drinking in Style*. “I thought about doing the app with coding,” said multimedia instructor Douglas Strahler, “but it was a six-week class, and I thought it would take the students six weeks just to understand the coding.” Instead, students built the app with InDesign CS 5.5 and the Adobe Digital Publishing Suite.

InDesign CS 5.5 hadn't arrived by the first week of class, so the students spent time looking at tablet magazines like *GQ* and *Wired* that are created with Adobe tools. “Then we went to the library and pulled print versions of the magazines off the shelf and compared them,” Strahler said. He pointed out how magazine apps give navigational cues, how they indicate that an interactive layout is clickable, and how horizontal and vertical layouts differ.

Even though the students knew earlier versions of InDesign, there was a steep learning curve to figure out the file structure in CS 5.5 and to iron out workflow, said Strahler, who was one of two professors on the project. The class ended up designing the magazine only vertically, not horizontally. *Barcode* is now available on the iTunes store through the *Best of Newhouse* app.

Northwestern University

In the Magazine Innovation Project, a capstone course at Medill, 18 graduate students created *Beaucoup*, an iPad magazine aimed at professional women in Chicago.

“My only directive was to make a magazine publication for tablet devices,” said journalism professor Bill Handy. “Students did audience research on who owned tablets, made projections about who would likely adopt based on the adoption of other technologies, and developed a concept to serve those people.” They then assessed advertiser interest, developed a business plan, met with potential investors, created content, took a crash lesson in InDesign, and created the app with Adobe tools.

“We were lucky because while the class was going on, MPA (Magazine Publishers of America) was having its national meeting in Chicago,” Handy said. “Students went to learn but often ended up teaching magazine executives about the iPad. They got a lot of gratification out of it.”

The biggest challenge, Handy said, was not mastering the technology but developing a unique editorial concept. “Whether a publication is carved in stone, in print, or on a tablet, that is still the key to its success.”

Western Washington University

At Western Washington University, writer and publisher Jeff Galbraith has found a way to let students experiment with interactive storytelling without actually publishing an app. Galbraith teaches a capstone editing course in the school’s extension program. Last spring, when his students asked to build a tablet app, Galbraith told them to research the software options.

“We couldn’t find anything that allowed for public distribution and management that wasn’t both professionally geared and priced,” he said. Instead, the class opted for a free, high-end PDF program that allowed for interactivity. It taught the class editing and production skills for tablets, and the students could view their “app” on a tablet, Galbraith said. “The only drawback was that it wasn’t on iTunes.”

Mobile technology: A moving target

Options for creating mobile magazines are exploding. Some journalism programs have simply created mobile or tablet-friendly versions of their magazine websites. Others are paying for programmers to build custom apps in HTML5 with CSS3, or taking advantage of new software that makes app development increasingly accessible to non-programmers.

Many magazine programs are attracted to Adobe software because of its seamless integration with Photoshop, InDesign, and other tools widely used in the industry. Schools that began experimenting with Adobe’s Digital Publishing Suite when it was still in its free beta version were dismayed when Adobe released the software last spring and announced a costly pricing scheme aimed at business and commercial publishing houses, including a platform free of nearly \$6,000 a year plus service fees that could climb to the thousands. The fees sent educators scrambling for alternatives.

“They gave everyone a look at this software, said have fun, and then they took it away,” said San Francisco State instructor and designer Beth Renneisen last summer.

This fall Adobe released a more affordable Single Edition pricing option for the Digital Publishing Suite. Downloadable from Adobe.com for \$395, the Single Edition provides tools to create a one-time-only iPad publication. “This has opened the door for people like us,” Renneisen said.

One drawback: Apps created with Single Edition can’t be updated, unlike those created with subscription versions of the Digital Publishing Suite. Each semester that

students produce a new issue of their magazine, the adviser (or whoever holds the \$99 Apple developer license) has to submit a new app to iTunes under a different name. The \$395 Single Edition must also be purchased again.

Andrew Hullinger, an instructor in Medill's Magazine Innovation Project, expects to see a lot of cheap, user-friendly tools for building apps emerge soon. After all, he said, it's been only a little more than a year since the iPad was released, yet already "we've gone from a time when no one could build an app unless they were a programmer to now, when anyone—a ma and pa business—can just do it."

In July the French company Aquafadas released a set of tools for creating apps for iPad, iPhone, and Android devices. The package includes a plug-in for InDesign that creates interactive content, a tool that generates apps without coding, a means of previewing the app, and a Web portal for managing apps and doing analytics. The whole tool set is free. Once an app is completed, the user pays for a one-time licensing fee that can run as little as \$350.

And remember Quark? In early 2011 the company released its own App Studio for the Quark Publishing System in a bid, perhaps, to reclaim its prominence in the design and publishing field. The App Studio is powered by Aquafadas, which also offers app tools for Quark.

Hullinger, a creative technologist with Proximity Advertising and a former digital marketing executive with Leo Burnett, has been exploring a wide range of tools that students could use to create magazine apps easily. One example: He is experimenting with repurposing a simple comic book app to tell serious journalism (andyhullinger.com/medill_comic_test/)

The ePub revolution might also provide solutions for creating interactive student publications. "In the next year I think we'll see a blurring between apps and enhanced books," said journalism professor Paul Niwa, whose Online Publishing class at Emerson College was one of the first to publish student work as an iPad app.

So what will students use to create apps in the future?

"At this point, anything is fair game," Hullinger said.