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**Teaching Collaboration:
A Model for Multimedia Projects**

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The moment of exhilaration. The moment when it all comes together. In the best creative teams, this is the moment when you know the story you're telling is going to be infinitely more compelling because of the contributions of the other media professionals working with you.

This is the moment we as faculty members sought to capture when we created a teaching model called the Collaborative Hour at Kent State. The approach is used in a semester-long collaboration among students in three courses—Magazine Writing and Editing, Information Graphics, both capstone courses in their majors, and Cybermedia Design, an upper-level course. Students meet in teams once a week to work on multimedia projects.

We are looking for two outcomes in this capstone experience: 1) an excellent multimedia story package for online that is worthy of adding to a student's portfolio and that would impress a recruiter and 2) for the student to learn to work effectively in a defined role on a professional team.

After three faculty members researched the use of creative teams on magazines and newspapers,¹ Kent State instituted the Collaborative Hour in 2000 as part of the curriculum for news and visual journalism majors. The Collaborative Hour model is meant to be democratic because all students need the instruction. Faculty members don't cherry-pick students for a small class. In the past 10 years, faculty members have refined the model, and what we've learned may be useful to others who want to use this approach to teach multimedia storytelling.

In addition to the semester-long collaboration, in which most students are seniors, Kent State has a junior-level collaboration that teams up Feature Writing, Photojournalism I, and Magazine Design or News Design, depending on the semester. This earlier collaboration, in which students cycle through the Collaborative Hour in four-week segments, helps to prepare students for the capstone project.

Ann Schierhorn is a professor of journalism and mass communication and coordinator of the news sequence at the Kent State University in Kent, Ohio. The school has 1,100 majors, with 150 of those in the magazine program. She teaches magazine publishing, feature writing, magazine writing and editing, and a seminar in specialized business media.

Each team in the capstone collaboration works on one story package for a specific audience, either on campus—usually the campus online magazine, *theburr.com*—or off campus. For on-campus media, the students are encouraged to work with editors while they are conceptualizing and developing their projects. At a minimum, the final package includes a story that is written and designed for online and has interactive information graphics. But students eagerly add photo galleries, videos, or audio slideshows. In these collaborations, one team member from a design course often is a photojournalism major who can bring additional skills to the collaboration. If not, all the students have completed at least the basic photography and videography courses, so they can shoot and edit photos and video.

The Collaborative Hour has one team per writer. Ideally, teams have three members, one from each class. Sometimes there is surplus of designers, and faculty members have assigned an additional designer to a team. In that case, the additional team member creates another design element. Sometimes there are fewer photographers than writers in the junior-level Collaborative Hour. In that case, the photojournalism instructor selects certain students to be team members in two four-week rotations. Students are assigned to teams by the instructors, who make an attempt to intersperse the shy students with the assertive ones and to avoid teaming up close friends.

Beginning in fall 2011, all freshmen will take *Multimedia Techniques*, a first-level course introducing digital photography, audio, videography, and website production. Because students lose what they don't use when it comes to these skills, the faculty members have decided that students will be required to do at least one major project using multimedia in each subsequent course. In *Newswriting*, this could be a group project incorporating the photo, audio, video, and Web skills learned in *Multimedia Techniques*. In *Feature Writing*, the reporters might focus more on audio editing skills and producing audio slideshows with the photojournalism students in the junior-level Collaborative Hour. Then, in the capstone Collaborative Hour, the students are adding the additional elements of information graphics and video to a Web presentation or, in the future, a design for a tablet like the iPad. As students move through their courses, the faculty members want them to be reporting and writing more complex stories and using multimedia with more sophistication.

At the capstone level, we want all the elements to be professional. Still, the most difficult element to teach is not the software and writing skills taught in the individual classes but the intellectual process of planning, editing, and producing taught in the Collaborative Hour: Is the story cohesive? Do the parts work together? Does the whole package make sense? Is the story compelling? Does it have real depth with in-person reporting? It can have all the bells and whistles of multimedia, but if there's no substance, we haven't succeeded.

To teach this effectively, faculty members have found they must embed the Collaborative Hour into the time block for the classes. All three are scheduled in the same two-hour block Mondays and Wednesdays. In the first hour on Wednesday for 12 weeks, students meet in teams for collaboration in a room that can accommodate about 50 students at round tables.² For the other three hours a week, they meet in their individual classrooms.

The time in the Collaborative Hour is highly structured to teach the process of collaboration.³ Each team member comes to class with three story ideas, and the team winnows those nine ideas to one. A team member presents the best idea to the faculty members in an elevator pitch. (We say: “You’re on an elevator, your editor gets in, and you want to sell him or her on an idea you want to pursue. You have 30 seconds....”) After faculty feedback, the team refines the idea, determines if the project is feasible, and plans the multimedia and basic design before the reporting begins. Students learn to rewrite, reshoot, redesign, and negotiate with peers. Then they present their work and evaluate their teammates and themselves on effectiveness as a member of a creative team with a 10-question survey.⁴

The completed multimedia project is graded by the faculty members using a rubric they refine each semester.⁵ The team grade is 10 percent of the final course grade for each student.

The student’s individual work for the project is graded separately by the faculty member who taught the student’s skills course. The percentage of the final course grade allotted to the individual work for the Collaborative Hour is set in the syllabus of the individual course. Students in each class work on other projects specific to their discipline as well. The magazine students, for example, write two other major stories in addition to working on the collaborative project.

In the end, the projects are better than they would have been as individual work. The writers have to think visually, the infographic designers have to think how their work amplifies the written work and tells additional stories, and the Web designers have to think about how their work brings cohesion, excitement, and understanding to the project.

The projects are solid portfolio pieces that can be used in a job interview to start a conversation about the ability to work collaboratively. About half also are published, especially in student media. And some have won awards, including “The Gulf Coast: The Long Road Back” <<http://www.folioweb.org/devadoss/msnola/index.html>> about New Orleans and Mississippi five years after Katrina. That package, published on theburr.com, won the first-place regional award for online feature reporting in the 2009 Society of Professional Journalists Mark of Excellence contest. Others are less ambitious but still rewarding for the students, such as a story package on three graphic designers who started a T-shirt company <<http://www.personal.kent.edu/~kdeckert/campfireshirts/>> or a package on a medieval theater class preparing to perform a play in Toronto <http://www.theburr.com/archives/Fall_10/2010/09/the-road-to-toronto/>. In the latter case, the team members completed work in the spring, giving them a portfolio piece. Then the photographer continued to follow the troupe and added an audio slideshow after the collaboration ended. The online student magazine published a package with just the story and the slideshow.

Teaching collaboration has benefits for faculty members as well as students. It allows senior faculty members to model teaching techniques for newly hired faculty members and to mentor junior faculty members in the classroom. Junior faculty members often have fresh

ideas to refine the process. One of our most successful revisions came from a new faculty member who suggested a faster turnaround on projects in the junior-level Collaborative Hour. In those collaborations, students complete their projects in four weeks, which allows the instructors to divide the students into three rotations. Then faculty members work with five teams at once instead of as many as 15.

The joint grading process helps all faculty members learn from each other about how they view the project and process. Faculty members haggle good-naturedly over the team grade until they agree on the overall impact of the story package. If one faculty member is feeling especially generous with A's, the others push back. It probably helps that these faculty members have professional experience and feel confident judging whether projects meet or approach professional standards. I've learned more from these grading sessions with faculty members from other specialties than I have in any other interaction we have. We laugh a lot, too—a sign of creativity.

Faculty members and adjunct instructors who have taught in the Collaborative Hour at Kent include Paul Fresty, Bill Gentile, Teresa Hernandez, David LaBelle, Hyangsook Lee, Phil Long, Jacqueline Marino, Joe Murray, Carl Schierhorn, Pamela Tabar, and Bruce Zake. My thanks to each of them.

¹ Schierhorn, A. B., Endres, F., & Schierhorn, C. (2003). Creative teams on magazines: A management perspective. *Journal of Magazine & New Media Research*, 6(5). Retrieved October 15, 2010, from http://aejmc magazine.bsu.edu/journal/archive/Fall_2003/Schierhorn.htm

Schierhorn, A. B., Endres, F., & Schierhorn, C. (2001). Newsroom teams enjoy rapid growth in the 1990s. *Newspaper Research Journal*, 22(3), 2–15.

² This classroom arrangement is not only more useful for teamwork than traditional rows, but it also signals to students and visitors that a different kind of learning takes place here.

³ See the Collaborative Hour schedule in “JMC 46021 — Magazine Writing and Editing: Print and Digital,” 12–13. <http://aejmc magazine.arizona.edu/resources.html>

⁴ The survey questions: Did this student take the project seriously, devote significant time to this project, cooperate with the group, communicate with the group, attend team meetings, generate ideas, show initiative by volunteering and/or accepting responsibility, meet deadlines, do quality work, and bring a sense of ethics and professionalism to the project?

⁵ In grading the team projects, the faculty members jointly answer these questions: Do the words and visuals work together and tell the story clearly? Is the home page visually compelling? Is the written story compelling? Do the title, subtitle, and other headings advance the story? Is the site easy to navigate? Is each page consistent in design? Do all Web features function properly and work together to advance the story? What is the overall impression of the project?