

Course on Covering Schools Breaks New Ground

Columbia University seminar aims to help reporters understand the education beat in depth

By Liz Willen



LynNell Hancock, a veteran education writer and a professor at Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism, hopes the new seminar on covering schools will inspire the next generation of journalists to embrace the untapped possibilities on the beat.

A writer who can explain education issues and policies with verve and depth can tackle anything in journalism, says Professor Hancock.

Armed with computers, laptops and lots of questions, the aspiring education journalists found their way to a sixth-floor classroom on a cold morning in January and began tackling the first myth about urban education: the teacher as hero.

Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism Professor LynNell Hancock had picked a selection of classic teacher-rises-above-all movies, with the aim of showing "one way that public perceptions and misperceptions of public education were formed."

Clips ranged from the 1955 "Blackboard Jungle" to "Up the Down Staircase," "Stand and Deliver" and finally, 1995's "Dangerous Minds."

During the discussion that followed, the 14 students immediately noticed a remarkable similarity. In each movie, kids are portrayed as poor or working-class savages with little self-control or regard, taught by a lone idealist who finally breaks through by enforcing high standards and middle-class values and by treating students with respect, Hancock said.

"My message was that this course hopes to turn this simplistic view on its head, offering students exposure to the complex context in which schools exist," said Hancock, who has covered education for the Newsweek, the Village Voice and the New York Daily News. "Education reform can't happen in any meaningful way if we rely solely on individual, saintly teachers."

The new seminar on covering education, jointly developed by Hancock and the Hechinger Institute on Education and the Media, is funded through a Knight Foundation grant to the Institute. The curriculum

will be revised after this spring's pilot course and made available to journalism schools nationally

Hechinger Institute Director Richard Lee Colvin, a former education writer for the Los Angeles Times, proposed the course to the Knight Foundation after recognizing how little training U.S. journalism schools offer on the topic.

"Just about everybody who comes out of a journalism school makes their way to the education beat at some time, yet when I looked at J-schools nationally, I could not find a single class being taught about how to cover education," Colvin said. "If journalism students see the great variety and depth of the issues on the education beat, they'll want to stay on the beat when they get that inevitable newsroom assignment."

The course marks the first time in recent memory that Columbia Journalism School has devoted a full-scale, semester-long course to education reporting, said J-school historian James Boylan, who wrote "Pulitzer's School: Columbia School of Journalism, 1903-2003" (Columbia University Press, 2003).

Meeting weekly, the course will cover topics ranging from the history of public education to the No Child Let Behind Act, teachers unions, charter schools and standardized testing. Students will spend a second seminar day each week in one of seven cooperating New York City public schools, observing teachers, principals and students.

Columbia Journalism School Dean Nicholas Lemann said that many journalists' ignorance about education is out of line with public interest in the topic.

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“Most reporters don’t know very much about education, and it tends to be a lack of knowledge that is quite easy to correct in a short time at a university,” Lemann said. “You can at least give some of the basics on how it works structurally and some of the major issues.”

Lemann, who cemented his own passion for the topic while writing “The Big Test: The Secret History of the American Meritocracy” (Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1999), believes better trained reporters can help raise the beat’s prestige.

“At a time when news organizations are thinking about how to make themselves more powerful in the marketplace and how to have better local coverage, the obvious place to go is education reporting, because that is what readers want,” he said.

The students selected for the course submitted essays detailing their own education experience and what they hoped to learn.

“I’m attracted to the breadth of story possibilities in education reporting,” said Suzanne La Barre, 25, who previously covered schools for the Berkeley (Calif.) Daily Planet, a twice-weekly independent newspaper. La Barre said she is looking forward to gaining “a much-needed primer on education policy and history,” something she said she was unable to get at her previous job.

“At the Daily Planet, I wasted hours and hours slaving over data and policy briefs with little to no sense of what they meant,” La Barre said.

Lucas Ryan Garcia, 28, edited a weekly military-base newspaper in Brunswick, Maine, while he served in the Navy. “Education writing is such a broad, complicated topic that covers everything from politics to immigration,” he said. “It’s intensely important that dedicated people dive into this subject to translate it for everyone else.”

Elizabeth Mendez Berry, 29, became fascinated with the topic after reporting a story on a dual language school in the Bronx for a Columbia course last fall. The former hip-hop critic soon realized both how tough and how important the education beat could be.

“It was a real challenge to write the story, and I realized that it’s harder to get into a public school in New York City than it is to follow a rapper into the VIP section at Lotus (an “it” club).”

By the end of the course, Hancock hopes students will have a far more complex, nuanced view of schools than offered courtesy of Hollywood in the film clips they watched on Day One.

“A school is an organic institution, part of a larger system, all parts of which are important to the whole,” Hancock said. “They will have a lot of exposure to urban high schools that are completely different than the blackboard jungles.”

Columbia’s curriculum will be available on the Hechinger Web site at the end of the course this spring at <http://hechinger.tc.columbia.edu/>.

The curriculum site will also include a multimedia resource guide filled with examples of excellent education reporting, suggested reading, Web resources and published source materials, many developed with the assistance of education writing veteran Dale Mezzacappa, formerly of the Philadelphia Inquirer. **lu**

Liz Willen, Assistant Director of the Hechinger Institute, is available to assist other journalism professors who would like to create a similar course. Reach her by email at liz.willen@tc.columbia.edu or by phone at 212-870-1072. She is a graduate of the Columbia School of Journalism