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From online to outside: An experiment in teaching and applying digital skills in the outdoors

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Abstract

Changing the typical learning environment can be intimidating and add stress to the learning equation for the student, but it doesn't have to. For example, which of the following scenarios is less stressful for students and provides the best opportunity for success: online learning or experimental learning? Why not both? This paper will provide key takeaways from a course taught this semester that put students squarely outside of their comfort zones - in two different ways. This particular course consisted of two sections – online learning and an overnight, in-person workshop at a state park. After the course was completed, students were surveyed on several different topics related to anxiety and security. The experiment found students enjoyed learning outside of the normal, classroom setting – and had few issues regarding the process of learning about technology in the outdoors.

The great outdoors – particularly those of a remote area of the Hill Country in southwest Texas – may not seem like the ideal place to teach technology. But as revealed by a weekend trip in February 2016, when it comes to teaching, limits can be pushed and tried-and-true rules broken.

Starting in spring 2016, Texas State University's School of Journalism and Mass Communication created and taught an experimental course in partnership with Texas Parks and Wildlife, where students were placed squarely outside of their comfort zones. 'Mobile Storytelling in the Park' was a hybrid class that was part of the school's short course series – a group of three, one-credit-hour courses focused on emerging and niche topics (Royal, 2016). The Mobile Storytelling class aimed to train students in methods used by 'mojos' – mobile journalists – introducing them to the concept of the multimedia journalist, who carries 'out new tasks, especially in the online environment, which are closely related to the promotion of new narratives, the management of social networks and the new sources of information' (Sánchez-Garcia, Campos-Dominguez and Berracol Gonzalo, 2015, p.195). In this environment 'journalists have had to assume tasks that were traditionally characteristic of other professions, which has forced then to develop a more complex and demanding profile' (Masip and Mico, 2009, p.93). A profile of tasks that includes producing content for different platforms (for example television and print reporters developing content for digital, print reporters developing video content), journalists working solo on projects instead of with a team, with the reporter in charge of all aspects of reporting (including camera work, interviews, writing and editing) and requiring them to be comfortable using different types of technology in workflows, mainly the smart phone.

As indicated by the title 'Mobile Storytelling in the Park', the course developed through several meetings with Texas Parks and Wildlife. There was no blueprint of what to do as part of this type of collaboration, so all scenarios were on the table. One thing that was clear from the start was that

students would produce social video content as an outcome. Furthermore, since the class would (at first) meet online, it became clear that content needed to cover the basics of mobile journalism. We decided to structure it into 6 modules over two weeks, each lasting 30 minutes to an hour and taking place online (student feedback would later confirm that this assumption was for the most part, correct and helpful). Modules covered topics like mobile storytelling tools, how to tell a story with visuals, shot composure, editing on a phone with apps like 'Videolicious' and social sharing. The goal was to prepare students to take better pictures and produce, shoot and edit videos on their smart phones.

Figure 1: Garner State Park. Photo by Dale Blasingame, Texas State University.

With these skills covered, the class undertook the 3 hour journey from campus to Garner State Park (see Figure 1 above). Divided into 4 small groups, students were asked to create mobile storytelling projects over the course of the weekend. In close collaboration with Texas Parks and Wildlife, the idea was that project outcomes could be shared via its social channels to promote state parks to young people (Blasingame, 2016). Texas Parks and Wildlife were very clear about what types of content would be most beneficial for the agency's mission and audience, asking for 'personal narratives' giving reasons why more young people should visit state parks, shared via: Facebook's native video function; a 10-photo essay to be shared via Instagram; a 10-snap Snapchat story documenting a day in the park; and a 2-3 minute mini-documentary. Students worked in groups on the mini-documentary portion of the assignment, and had to pitch their own ideas for the story, resulting in five different mini-documentary projects. The Snapchat and Instagram stories were completed and submitted to the students' personal social networks while in the park. The Facebook video assignment has a longer deadline – students were given two weeks to complete editing. And students had a month to complete editing of the mini-documentary for YouTube. Most had never been to a state park before and few had ever camped outside before this trip.

After editing was completed, students were anonymously surveyed about their experience, the insecurities related to the class. Of the survey questions listed below, the first seven answers were

evaluated on a Likert scale of 1-5 – with one equaling 'no stress at all' and an answer of five equaling 'I totally freaked out'.

1. Rate your stress level with completing the online modules of this course.
2. Rate your stress level with completing the tasks required at Garner State Park.
3. Rate your stress level with using technology to complete course requirements.
4. Rate your stress level with taking a class outside of the normal classroom setting.
5. To be more specific, rate your stress level regarding camping and being in a park setting.
6. Rate your stress level regarding working with a group to complete course projects.
7. Rate your stress level knowing your work completed for this class would eventually be shared with Texas Parks and Wildlife.

Questions were devised in order to gather well-rounded comprehension of student perceptions of the course – from the online portion, to being in the park, to using technology they had not used or encountered before, to camping, working in groups and producing content for Texas Parks and Wildlife's sizeable audience. In our experience, students tend to voice displeasure with group work and that particular question was expected to garner the harshest criticism. In an ideal world questions regarding workload would be right down the middle – not too much and not too little. And, since students were visibly nervous at the beginning of the projects, knowing that the content would be shared with a large public audience was also expected to raise stress levels.

The first question asked for student feedback regarding the online modules. Students did not appear to experience much stress and the average response (on the 1-5 scale) was 1.93. This result was a bit lower than expected, which shows that future online modules could be pushed a bit further, as 6 of the total 16 students responded to the question as having no stress at all. As one student said, 'I felt like the modules were the perfect length':

> You were able to cover a good amount of information in a quick manner. I especially liked the supplemental links you provided. If there was a topic that was covered a bit too briefly, or I couldn't fully grasp, I could always get a second perspective what was being discussed in the lectures.
>
> student questionnaire feedback (2016)

The scenario proposed in Question 2 – regarding stress levels when faced with the assignment tasks – produced the highest results amongst the students. The average response was 3.0, with one student outlining that they experienced no stress at all, another student saying that they 'totally freaked out' and the remainder falling squarely in the middle. For some, higher anxiety levels were attributed to being unaware of the topic of the mini-documentary assignment until they arrived at the park. As one student said:

> I wish we would have known our assigned topics the night before [...]. That way we could have better planned our storylines for the video. I know it's a part of journalism to be thrust into the fire, but I felt as if my team didn't really have a solid plan, which resulted in poor interviews and video footage.
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> Final Class Survey (2016)

Students found out their mini-documentary assignments and team members a week before heading to the park. For others, grasping the layout of the park itself was the major concern:

> I honestly think I was pretty well prepared [...]. I've been camping before, and I've had some experience with shooting. One thing I will say is I wish we would've had a better orientation of the park before we got there so we could've planned ahead. But I guess we could've done that on our part.

Final Class Survey (2016)

At the other end of this scale, some appreciated the faculty's hands-off approach once the students were on assignment – 'I didn't feel under prepared, and I was pleasantly surprised by how much freedom we had at the park,' a third student said.

Once assignments had been completed, worries about technology seemed to slip to the back of students' minds. The average stress level indicated by the third question – on using smart phone technology – was 2.0, with 7 students saying that there was no stress at all involved with using the equipment. However, the post-mortem timing of this question may have played a role in these responses. At the time there were several issues with technology inside the park, including failure to turn on microphones, shaky or low-quality video and connectivity problems. Even though the students were able to overcome these issues, they did cause some panic during the assignments. Battery life was the most frequently mentioned issue, including this advice for students on the next round of the course: 'BRING A FREAKING EXTRA BATTERY'.

Students felt completely at home outside of the classroom. The fourth question asked students to rate the stress levels associated with taking a class that occurs outside of the normal setting, for which the average response was 1.25. A large proportion, 13 of the 16 students, said they had no stress at all in learning outside of typical classroom settings. In order to receive more specific feedback, students were also asked to rate the stress levels connected with camping and being in an outdoor park setting. The average response to Question 5 was 1.56 – with 9 students saying that the park setting and camping provided no stress at all. Again, students were comfortable with learning outside of the usual classroom atmosphere.

Students rated working within a group as one of the higher stress factors of the project. Students were asked to rate the stress created by working within a group, with an average response of 2.62. Of the whole group, 3 students said the group mini-documentary assignment provided no stress at all, were another 3 said working in a group 'totally freaked them out'. Beyond working in groups, students were also mildly concerned about their work being featured on Texas Parks and Wildlife's various social media channels and the average response to the seventh question was 2.62. The majority of the cohort rated their anxiety level as fairly high, with 5 students saying it caused no stress at all. In the end, Texas Parks and Wildlife chose to share a large percentage of student work, particularly still photography via Instagram. The Facebook native video assignment, asking students to explain why more college-aged people should visit state parks, produced the highest quality work and has proved popular with the Texas Parks and Wildlife audience, some generating tens of thousands of views.

The eighth and final question asked students if they would hypothetically be interested in a similar class, worth six hours of credit and requiring more than two weeks of travel and camping. While the final question had nothing to do with this particular weekend in the park, it was important for the school to determine the future potential of the class. The question was asked with a similar Likert scale, with an answer of 1 being "no interest at all" and 5 being "sign me up." Students were emphatic with their support of this experiment, averaging 4.18 on the response to this question.

Overall, the feedback for this specific course was overwhelmingly positive. One student said that it 'was seriously probably the best mass comm class I have taken in four years'. Where another outlined

that 'the class worked really well [...]. It was a great environment and lots of fun, which made the learning better and also made what we were doing that much more enjoyable.'

Feedback from this pilot course has factored heavily into designing version 2.0 of the Mobile Storytelling in the Park class. We have shared student advice on the first day of the semester and 19 students have signed up for the second incarnation of the class, in spring 2017. Some of the higher stress factors – not knowing their assignments until the day they arrived in the park, working with technology and in groups – have been addressed during the process of planning this next installment. The school has also received a grant to expand this experiment, applying it to two Study-in-America courses, where professors will take students to state and national parks around the country over two weeks in the summer to earn six hours of credit, much like a Study Abroad course. The first version of these expanded park storytelling courses is scheduled for summer 2017.

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Biography

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