

Experiences I had as an undergraduate at Central Michigan University fuel the way I teach and interact with my students today.

I gained valuable lessons from every class at CMU, but I learned the most in journalism courses led by adjunct professors. These working professionals placed me in real-world reporting situations and expected me to perform like a veteran. Sometimes I succeeded. Oftentimes I fell flat on my face. Still, completing summer internships, job-shadowing reporters and landing my own freelance gigs all shaped my viewpoint on teaching and learning.

I believe learning happens when your mind draws a specific conclusion then assigns future behavior based on a previous experience. For example, touching a hot stove that burns your hand is a life experience. Your mind determines that stoves can be hot, thus making you decide not to touch another stove unless it's cool.

If learning is the practice of drawing conclusions from life experiences, then teaching is the art of creating specific scenarios that will elicit specific conclusions. More specifically, the professor's role is to bring the stove to class, turn it on, and then tell students to touch it. In a perfect world, every student will touch the stove, get burned and learn the lesson. However, an additional role of the professor is to assess whether the student has learned. If the student hasn't learned, it's up to the professor to determine what kept the student from drawing the conclusion with the best outcome.

I take my role as scenario-creator seriously. We spend ample time practicing concise writing, thorough research and insightful interviews in my reporting classes. I leave my students with three important skills when the semester ends. First, they're able to explain complex ideas and news events (verbally and in writing) much better than when the class began. Second, my students learn how to teach themselves new skills. Journalism is continually evolving, so my students will know how to add to their tool belts. Finally, I rewire students' thinking so they're more comfortable with questioning people in powerful positions. This is an essential skill if they want to become a journalist who looks after the public's best interest.

From there, I match promising students with opportunities to tell stories in professional venues. I use my network of journalists to introduce editors to students who seek internships or freelance contracts. My thinking behind this is simple. Students will graduate with a better understanding of what it takes to hold a full-time newsroom position if they perform the tasks of a professional journalist while still in college.

Mastering these skills is the difference between passing or failing my class. But perhaps more importantly, executing these skills in a real newsroom is the difference between having a great career or being softly ushered out of the business. Today's newsroom editors expect lively and engaging writing at a moment's notice. The public expects deeply reported and deeply researched pieces that have nuance and complexity. Sources expect that their comments won't be used out of context or to further some larger agenda. We live in a time where deadlines are immediate and it's even more important for journalists to distinguish themselves from pundits and bloggers. I take pride in giving students the skills that build their credibility as accurate storytellers.

*Christopher J. Brooks*