

An Ethical Inventory for the Broadcast Teacher

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Among the multitude of internal and external ethical issues that face the broadcast educator, those pertaining to the classroom itself are the most immediate, the most fundamental, and yet, the most often neglected given our discipline's productional and marketplace preoccupation. Nevertheless, classroom climate remains the primary validator or repudiator of a department's—and an individual teacher's—ethical awareness.

In over three decades of teaching, administrating, and consulting, the author has stumbled upon, backed into, and collided with a number of classroom-based ethical issues. The lessons that emerged from these bruising experiences were taught by far wiser people: academic mentors, colleagues, alumni, and perceptive students. The aim here is to inventory these principles so: (1) younger faculty can avoid some of this bruising in their own professional development; and (2) veteran professors can conduct their own "wellness check" on their modes of classroom operation that may have become so second nature.

Fundamentally, ethics "is the study of what we ought to do," John Merrill advises. "In a real sense, ethics has to do with duty—duty to self and duty to others" (Merrill, 1999). Nowhere are these twin duties more intertwined than in the classroom where the student/teacher interaction takes place in such close and potentially contentious quarters.

An inventory based on the author's three decades of classroom coping and grounded in a Utilitarianism that puts a premium on doing the greatest good for the greatest number of people. Some of the following (admittedly debatable) suggestions may present an inconvenience for the professor. Others, in their application, occasionally may work against an individual student. But the contention here, borne out by the author's own experience, is that adherence to these practices is far more likely to bring greater and more sustained benefits to those on both sides of the podium.

"Ethical dilemmas do not occur in a vacuum," philosophy professor Christopher Meyers points out. "They are always embedded in a context, a context which invariably includes societal, cultural, professional, and organizational factors" (Meyers, 1990). For teachers seeking to anticipate and mitigate such dilemmas, the syllabus establishes legitimate parameters of this context in writing, classroom management emphasizes accepted expectations of societal and cultural respect, and instructor behavior tends most to signal professional and organizational standards.

SYLLABUS PRACTICES

The Syllabus is a Contract

This document is a quasi-legal articulation of the promissory experience in which the student will invest time and money. As in any legal document, the rights and responsibilities of both parties need to be clearly and explicitly stated. They cannot later be modified without the expressed (and preferably written) permission of these parties. In short, the contextual "rules" must be specified in order to establish an ethical duty on the part of students and teacher to live up to them. A sample syllabus that represents these "rules" and mirrors our 10 syllabus practices is found in the Appendix. References to it will be indicated by parenthetical SS citations.

The Syllabus is the Genesis

Passing out the syllabus should be the starting point for the course. Students should

know immediately the nature and demands of this experience in order to make an informed decision as to whether they wish to commit to it. In this way, they still retain the option of going elsewhere before registration gates close on what might otherwise be perceived as a fifteen-week incarceration. This may mean they choose another course, or even another major. But we have an ethical responsibility to provide accurate information upon which such choices can be made. It might even be wise to have syllabi available at some central location and/or on the Web during pre-registration so that potential enrollees can examine the course's character during initial class scheduling.

The Syllabus Should Tailor Attendance to Class Paradigm

Courses can be divided into three paradigms: responsibility to self courses, responsibility to peers courses, and hybrid courses. Responsibility to self offerings are usually lecture classes. Here, the student's presence or absence will largely impact only themselves. So leaving attendance up to the student can be a valuable test of each individual's own commitment and maturity. Woody Allen once observed that "eighty percent of life is just showing up." The sooner we provide students with the opportunity to test this theory for themselves, the sooner they will evolve their own code of conduct in this regard. Forcing attendance in a responsibility to self course only prolongs high school paternalism and suggests that the professor is not convinced that course material is pertinent and structured enough to motivate attendance without compulsion.

Responsibility to peers courses, on the other hand, require the active interaction of all students to achieve cooperative learning. Seminars, performance classes, and production experiences require the participation of students in teams and build on student reactions to each others' contributions. In such situations, an instructor has every right to demand/count attendance to try to ensure that every student can rely on the labor and insights of their colleagues.

Hybrid responsibility courses are those that intermix team learning situations with information gathering sessions. A class in copywriting, for example, may encompass (1) sessions primarily devoted to lecture material as well as (2) sessions in which the students must work in creative teams or provide feedback on each others' spots in playback criticism colloquies. In such cases, the syllabus may well indicate that attendance is encouraged in the former—but mandated in the latter (SS Gen. method #4). Such a system manifests an ethical concern for group learning without unduly inhibiting individual decision-making (and experience in living with its consequences).

The Syllabus Should Clearly Communicate Entry-Level Expectations

This ethical practice is grounded upon an honest specification of prerequisites (SS Prreq). These should accurately reflect the prior knowledge and skills needed to begin the learning progression that the syllabus lays out. Prerequisites should not merely be a tool for enrollment management. Students quickly ascertain whether or not a previous course provided material germane to their current class. If the prerequisite appears irrelevant, it undercuts both the validity of the prerequisite class and the credibility of the course in which the student is now enrolled. On the other hand, classes that expect background competency in a certain area but do not communicate this prerequisite expectancy in the syllabus are setting the student up for guaranteed frustration and possible failure. It is an ethical responsibility of the syllabus author to make clear for whom this educational experience will be a major stretch—as well as for whom it may be a redundancy.

An important corollary to this practice involves the accurate articulation of course

Objectives (SS Course objectives). Course objectives should be written to candidly describe the intended outgrowth of this experience for the student—rather than to impress or placate a curriculum committee. Thus, the syllabus should not state that the class will "promote video self-expression" when its evaluative standards actually measure student ability to "construct television messages conforming to precise market strategies."

The Syllabus Should Establish and Validate Deadlines

Media students are being prepared for a very time-bound profession in which assignments are normally due at a given hour—not merely a given day. Late submissions in the electronic media may torpedo the efforts of a whole succession of people in the communication development chain. A class that does not teach the immutability of deadlines does a significant and potentially career-wrecking disservice to its students (SS Gen. method. #1). At the same time, in due recognition of campus exigencies, the syllabus should explicitly state the penalties for "lateness" as well as the documentation required for waiver or modification of these penalties due to medical/family emergencies or official university involvements. Students may grumble about "late" penalties—but they usually will concede the rationale behind them if that rationale has been accurately billboarded beforehand.

The Syllabus Should Address Incompletes Completely

Appropriate documentation should also be specified in the case of Incomplete grades, and requirements for the "I" grade made clear (SS Incomplete). It may be best to set Incomplete eligibility standards quite high—not just in fairness to all students in the course—but in fairness to those NOT in the course. Given the popularity of electronic media classes and the necessity of small sections in many production and performance areas, significant student demand backlogs often develop. The casual granting of Incompletes not only encourages less serious students to take away space from more committed peers, but also overfills subsequent classes when the instructor must, as an overload, accommodate students removing Incompletes.

The Syllabus Should Codify Credit and "Extra Credit"

As we have discussed, the ethical syllabus stipulates attendance and entry level expectations, class objectives, as well as deadline and Incomplete requirements. Obviously, it does so within the larger context of evaluation procedures for the course (SS Eval). However constructed, these evaluation criteria strive to guarantee that the various elements of every student's performance will be calculated and totaled via a uniform process. Yet, the cavalier use of "extra credit" can derail process equity (SS Gen. method. #8). Unless it is announced and made available to all from the very beginning, extra credit tends to penalize those students either too shy or too busy to ask for it—and puts the legitimacy of the overall evaluation system into doubt. If, on the other hand, "extra credit" is made available to all, one wonders why its assignment could not have been built into the course's central evaluation system in the first place.

The Syllabus Should Specify Required Outside Event Attendance

It is understood that today's student body, on most campuses, is much more diverse than were those of the past. Whether we refer to "non-traditional," "working adult," "part-time," "single parent," "distance learner," or "commuting" students, we are recognizing the existence of a large segment of our service population that is not in full time residence on

the campus and/or cannot devote undivided attention to their schooling. Ethically, the syllabus cannot "cut corners" for these learners or we lessen the education they receive and seem to unfairly hold to higher standards those fortunate enough to be able to focus exclusively on their studies. Nonetheless, the professor should keep the situations of all students in mind when the syllabus is designed. If outside lectures, films or field shoots are essential to meeting course objectives, then the time and date of each activity must be set down so that students can either make advance accommodation in their schedule or, if necessary, select another course (SS Gen. method. #9). Whenever possible, several alternative events (on different times and days of the week) should be specified for each outside assignment so students have the maximum chance of meeting these expectations while still fulfilling their non-class obligations.

The Syllabus Should Be Clearly 'Priced'

Large numbers of today's students are also working within very tight budgets—and budgets that have no resilience in the middle of a term. Thus, the syllabus must give an honest and up-front estimation of the monetary costs involved in meeting course requirements (SS Text/required mats). Beyond the specified textbook(s), such costs might include production supplies, graphic/specialized clerical materials, admission fees to required events, and access to VCRs, audio recorders, word processors, scanners, and other hardware. Initially specifying such costs allows students to ascertain if and how they can cover them—and avoids the mid-term "ethical dilemmas" (to repeat Meyer's term) that result when instructor requirement and student penury unanticipatedly collide.

The Syllabus Should Estimate Time Investment

As an extension of the previous two practices, *time* for many of today's students is in as short a supply as money. It is not simply a matter of addressing what attendances are required, and the monetary cost of in- and out-of-class activities, but also the total time expenditure that successful completion of the course will require (SS Gen. method. #7). Students then can calculate their total time obligation accordingly and decide if they can accommodate it.

CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT PRACTICES

Start and End Class On Time

Given the time-fixed profession media students are preparing to enter, reverence for the clock should be unquestioned. The instructor's own classroom time management should be no less disciplined than what is required of students in meeting their taped production, script submission, or other assignment deadlines. The class that constantly starts late, ends early, or runs over negates the aura of professional planning that teachers otherwise work so hard to instill. Such poor classroom time management can also imply disrespect for students and comparative disdain for the other classes and activities that precede or follow in their daily schedules.

Begin with a Billboard

Some students are extremely active in department activities and productions. They seem to live in the radio/television building. Others are new to the campus or have differing tasks and obligations that bring them to the department much less frequently. Yet, all are presumably full-time members of the class and need to feel fully oriented to its

setting. Starting each class with announcements as to department and college productions, auditions, meetings, scholarship competitions and other activities lets everyone feel that they're "in on the pipeline." Even though a given student may not have the time or interest to take part in most of these events, equal access to knowledge about them will greatly reduce feelings of "outsider alienation;" alienation that can have debilitating effects on the student's perception of the class and performance in it.

Master the 'Name Game'

Another trigger for student alienation is instructor inconsistency in referencing members of the class. If some students are called upon by name and others are not, a perception of favoritism can easily arise with the "known" individuals appearing to have an inside track in class assignments and evaluations. A similar presumption is made if some students are addressed by their first names and others by their last names. Be consistent and refer to every student in the same manner. This is absolutely critical if the class represents a wide age range. Older students want to fit in to what might be a long-postponed and therefore intimidating situation. Younger students do not want to feel as though they've been semantically relegated to the Thanksgiving Day kids' table. If the professor doesn't know everyone's name—first or last—a seating chart based on where students have chosen to locate can provide this information. Especially in large lecture courses, referencing class members by name will help to lessen the impersonal aura of such assemblies.

Use Appropriate Relational Terminology

Terms other than names should also be chosen to be inclusive rather than exclusive. Therefore, use language to describe students and their relationships that is equally applicable to all members of the class. Such terms as "partner" rather than "spouse" and "you students" instead of "you kids" evidence that the instructor duty to treat all students in a positive, relevant and uniform manner is being taken seriously.

Tally Discussion if You Wrote that it Counts

In seminar and similar classes, a "discussion grade" is a legitimate measure of student performance. Questions thrown out to the class by the instructor can constitute daily "oral quizzes" that assess both student preparation and interest. However, if discussion performance is a stated component of the grade, instructors have a responsibility to keep track of it as carefully as they do the results of written papers and tests. A basic tally sheet set up to record the number of relevant and thoughtful contributions each student makes during class sessions is a quick way to quantify learning performance. With a simple system of symbols jotted right on the seating chart, an accurate chronicle of meaningful participation unobtrusively can be kept.

Be True to Thy Text

Even in the electronic age, textbooks remain an efficient and portable way to package and convey information. Textbooks are expensive however, and students rightly rebel at having to purchase those that seem peripheral to the class. If a volume is important to attaining instructional objectives, the reading assignments from it should be integrated with the progression of the course. If this cannot be done, the centrality of the book to the class should be reevaluated. And if the professor is the text author, an additional ethical issue arises. Certainly, authors believe in the approach and scholarship of their self-written

treatises or they wouldn't have penned them to begin with. Nonetheless, to avoid any possible conflict of interest, it may be well for the professor/author to take the per book royalty sum, multiply this by the number of *new* books purchased by members of the class, and donate the total back to the college. (Because authors receive no royalties on the purchase of used books, these can be factored out. A show-of-hands survey early in the term—with an explanation as to the reason behind it—can separate out "new" from "used" and at the same time, provide for students a meaningful example of professional ethics in action.)

Leave Presentation Schedules to Chance

When it comes to oral and productional presentations, some students like to "go first." Others want to "be last." Fairly choosing among several applicants for these and other preferred slots is impossible and such a selection process inevitably breeds suspicions of professor favoritism. "I would have done better if you didn't make me go after her" may be an erroneous excuse—but the bias it suggests can undercut faith in the entire exercise. Determining presentation order by blind draw eliminates these dangers and gives aggressive (pushy?) students no edge over more accommodating or reticent ones. In addition, if the project presentations occur over several days, the instructor should avoid orally critiquing early ones so as not to give unfair advantage to those who drew later slots. Either conserve all commentary to the end of the project or give student presenters written and confidential critique sheets on a day-by-day basis.

Invite Enhancers, not Distractors

Guest lecturers can amplify, vivify and accentuate principles central to the course, but only if their experience is germane. Industry pros invited in merely because they are passing through town, pals of the professor, or "big names" (regardless of area of expertise) can divert a course from educating to ego-tripping before the first war story is fully spun. It is the instructor's duty to orchestrate each class session so it resonates course objectives. Irrelevant guests (like irrelevant video tapes) become time-wasting "fill" and suggest that neither the course nor its instructor have enough substance to justify their existence.

INSTRUCTOR BEHAVIORAL PRACTICES

Wring Out the Holidays

Holiday and other recesses become bloated when the instructor cancels the immediately prior class because "no one will show up anyway." Such an ethically impoverished practice teaches students that it is acceptable to opt out of professional obligations. It presents a model that devalues media education and reflects a mode of behavior that all but the shoddiest media companies reject.

Do a Show, not a Shift

Though the unit may have been taught a hundred times previous, it should be made new for the students now exposed to it. Like seasoned Broadway actors whose performances seem as fresh on the three hundredth show as they were on their third, veteran teachers should exude a pride of performance that demonstrates a respect for the current audience and an active adaptation to its particular needs. A teacher is not dragging in for a multi-hour shift to turn bolts or grill burgers. So rehearsing for class is as essential

as rehearsing for any external production or presentation. This studied vibrancy is important for any professor—but it is uncompromisingly demanded for those representing and referencing the dynamic discipline of electronic communication.

Keep the Stage Door Open

Unlike the actor, however, the educator's duty to audience is as much off-stage as it is on. This duty is primarily addressed via scheduled *office hours*—the specified time for student assistance and professional mentoring. These hours should be written in the syllabus (SS Heading), posted on the door, and as inviolate as class meeting times. Any genuine profession accommodates one-on-one client consultation. This is as true of professional educators as it is of physicians and lawyers—despite the salary differential. Whether face-to-face or by phone, student/teacher office hour contact delivers professional service in the most customized sense. Habituating younger and more timid students to avail themselves of such assistance may be as important as the assistance itself. Some professors therefore, lubricate the process by *requiring* of each student a brief telephone or office "ice-breaker" contact early in the term.

Manage Workflow to Avoid Practiced Mistakes

Assignments should not only be sequenced building blocks, but spaced in such a manner that instructor corrections from the previous one are back to students in time to be used as guides in preparing its successor. Otherwise, students simply practice their mistakes. Returning evaluations before the next assignment is given demonstrates regard for student labors and a proactive encouragement of such labors' success.

AN ETHICAL PRACTICES POSTSCRIPT

Most telecommunications professors understand the immense power of their media and therefore, the sobering task they face in preparing their students to handle this power not just skillfully, but also ethically. So perhaps broadcast educators' ethical sensitivities are acute enough to make this article's little inventory completely superfluous. But it also might be possible that everyone can benefit from a periodic review of how macrocosmic maxims are conveyed within our microcosmic classrooms—if for no other reason than to congratulate ourselves on our continued adherence to the sometimes subtle ethical requirements of our craft. Such adherence pays great guidance dividends to our students, and should renew in ourselves a comforting sense of professional purpose. For, as Sommers reminds us, "The best moral teaching inspires students by making them keenly aware that their own character is at stake" (Sommers, 1993).

REFERENCES

- Merrill, J.C. (1999). Foundations for media ethics. In A.D. Gordon and J.M. Kittross, *Controversies in Media Ethics*, (2nd ed.). New York: Longman, p. 1.
- Meyer, C. (1990). Blueprint of skills, concepts for media ethics course. *Journalism Educator*, p.29.
- Sommers, C.H. (1993, September 12). Teaching the virtues: A blueprint for moral education. *Chicago Tribune Magazine*, 255, p.18.

APPENDIX

COURSE SYLLABUS

BCA 311 – BROADCAST AND CABLE COPYWRITING 3(3-0)

Dr. Peter B. Orlik, Professor, Moore Hall 344; 774-7279
Broadcast & Cinematic Arts, Office Hours: 10-12 MWF

Bulletin Description:

Practice in the pervasive short forms of audio and video writing: commercials, continuity, public service announcements, and campaign evolution.

Prerequisites:

ENG 101 or 201 with a minimum grade of B (3.0) --- because this class assumes you already have developed above-average writing competency. Prerequisite documentation must be presented to the instructor. Anyone subsequently determined to lack this prerequisite without prior written instructor waiver will receive an "E" in the course.

Textbooks and Other Required Student-Furnished Materials:

Orlik, Peter. *Broadcast/Cable Copywriting, 6th edition*
(Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1998).

(new and used copies are equally acceptable)

Any standard pocket dictionary

Access to word processor or typewriter

Approximately \$5 in storyboard materials (end of semester)

Two three-ring binders and access to 3-hole punch

Special Requirements:

This class is part of the BCA "core". Therefore, BCA majors and minors are required to earn a minimum grade of C (2.0) for successful course completion.

General Methodology Used in Teaching the Course:

This is a lecture/discussion class employing a professional simulation approach. To maximally benefit from the class, it is helpful for you to conceive of this as a media agency trainee experience rather than a typical 3-credit college offering. Toward this end, the following procedural policies should be carefully noted:

1. As elsewhere in our profession, project deadlines must be met. The grade will drop two levels (such as from a "B" to a "C+") for each week day late. For full credit, assignments are due at the beginning of the class period. An assignment turned in after class is already one day late. If assignments are turned in to the departmental office, they must be time/date certified by a BCA secretarial assistant. Lateness due to documented medical or family emergency will be excused. Lateness due to documented participation in an official university activity may be excused if the timing of such participation did not permit you to complete the assignment in advance.
2. All projects must be typed (and on reasonably heavy paper stock) unless otherwise specified by the instructor. TWO copies normally are required. To promote anonymity during copy correction, your name should be written on the BACK of the assignment; NOT on the front. The aim is to ensure that instructor evaluation of this assignment will not be colored subconsciously by your performance on previous ones.
3. Any assignment with more than two words misspelled is an automatic "E", except for "timed exercise" spots written in-class. Writers should be conscientious dictionary and Thesaurus users.
4. Class sessions are intended to help you become acquainted with electronic media writing principles. Generally, attendance is not taken although you are responsible on the final examination for all material covered. Attendance is REQUIRED at all prior-announced "playback criticism" sessions, however, since there is a mutual responsibility to provide classmates with feedback on their writing efforts. You will be assessed a four-point deduct (see Evaluation section) for each missed "playback criticism" session.

5. "Playback criticism" sessions will be handled as in a real-world media agency. Try to develop a positive attitude toward them, realizing that such criticism can be very valuable in helping class members mutually to improve their own writing and analytical abilities.

6. In the main, this class focuses on commercial and PSA writing because: (a) these are the most pervasive electronic media format types; and (b) they constitute the most basic applications of radio/television syntax. Once this syntax is mastered, long-form audio/video scriptwriting projects become much more achievable.

7. This course assumes and assigns an average of two hours of outside work for every one hour spent in class.

8. It is expected that all students will complete all assignments. In fairness to all, there will be no "extra credit" options.

9. You will be required to visit an off-campus client in order to complete your advertising campaign proposal. You can arrange the visit(s) to fit your daily schedule.

Course Objectives:

Upon course completion, you should be able to:

1. Describe the various copy types utilized in the electronic media industries.
2. Define the role of copywriter and the variety of tasks that role encompasses.
3. Critique and revise/refine both self-written copy and copy created by others
4. Write effective commercials, public service announcements and other continuity for radio and television.
5. Conceive and prepare television storyboards.
6. Sculpt an acceptable entry-level *Copywriter's Portfolio*.
7. Research and execute a broadcast advertising campaign proposal.
8. Structure and deliver formal oral business presentations.

General Course Outline:

(NOTE: Specific daily assignments will be given as the term progresses. Some modification in time devoted to each subject may occur to compensate for unforeseen circumstances.)

Week 1 -- Introduction to the copywriter's world and terms; copywriter's *portfolio* and *handbook*; fundamentals of effective writing.

Week 2 -- Electronic media punctuation; univoice radio spots; avoiding the "TV soundtrack" in radio writing; keys to communication that sells.

Week 3 -- Emotional appeals; print and electronic layouts compared; attitudinal audience types.

Week 4 -- Progressive motivation; introduction to rational appeals.

Week 5 -- Rational appeals on radio; emotional and rational appeals summation; principles of dialogue writing.

Week 6 -- Requisites of true creativity; transforming print to radio communication; the constant challenge of definition.

Week 7 -- Principles of PSA (public service announcement) construction; writing the multivoice spot; exploiting radio's *imaginative primacy*.

Week 8 -- PUNCH (the culminating test for effective radio); blurring the commercial/PSA distinction; radio musical donuts.

Week 9 -- Small market radio writing challenges; introduction to television copywriting; the personality promo.

Week 10 -- Television customization services and techniques; highly competitive client categories (the caterie example); principles of campaign design and development.

Week 11 -- Individual work and conferences on campaign development projects (the field assignment).

Week 12 -- Concluding the field assignment; TV spot conceptualization: the *DDQ* (Demo-Deriving Quintet).

Week 13 -- Case studies in television advertising; developing the storyboard.

Week 14 -- Importance and techniques of effective client presentations; the management of forced choice decision-making.

Week 15 -- Storyboard presentations and target client feedback.

Week 16 -- Final examination utilizing *Copywriter's Handbook*; checking of finalized *Copywriter's Portfolio*.

Evaluation:

There will be approximately 15 project assignments during the term. The grade for each is converted to a numerical designation ("A" = 11, "B+" = 9, etc.). These are added up at term's end and ranked with the totals attained by other class members to arrive at the overall grade distribution. Some projects may be double- or triple-weighted. For example, a "B" (8 points) on a triple-weighted project would be recorded as 24 points (8 x 3). Student projects initially are judged on professional standards, but the above method of grading allows the *final* grade to reflect how each student performed in relation to other beginning copywriters rather than in relation to the more rigorous industry benchmarks used throughout the term for instructional and prescriptive evaluation.

A final examination carries four weights and covers all aspects of the course. It is a timed, open-notebook test in which you can utilize your *Copywriter's Handbook* compiled throughout the term.

Your *Copywriter's Portfolio* is separately evaluated and used to fine-tune the class curve before the final assignment of grades.

As with all other aspects of the class, the *Copywriter's Handbook* and *Copywriter's Portfolio* compilations have been designed as long-term personal resources rather than merely vehicles to be discarded once the term is over.

Incompletes:

No Incomplete (I) grades are given for this class unless:

- a) you have completed at least 80% of the course
- b) the Incomplete results from a documented medical or family emergency
- c) you are not failing the course at the time the Incomplete is requested