

Teaching Philosophy / John Affleck, Knight Chair in Sports Journalism and Society

I teach undergraduates to write about sports. Now, before you dismiss this essay on the grounds there is nothing more frivolous than a story about a football game, let me say that I think deeply about my work, and that work turns out to be important for my students' development as communicators. My teaching philosophy, which I've been honing since I first walked on Penn State's University Park campus in 2013, after a long career at The Associated Press, can be described in a few phrases.

If you can write about sports, you can write about anything _ My students often find their way to sports journalism because they love sports, but not always because they love writing. Either way, I meet them where they are, believing strongly that if I can succeed in teaching them the basic skills of sports writing – game stories, previews, features, columns, listening and asking questions, checking facts, adhering to ethical practices – I can make them significantly more concise and effective communicators for the rest of their lives.

Let's take the game story as an example. At the final buzzer of a Penn State basketball game, a journalist must immediately provide a short story not only with key facts about the result – the score, the teams, when the event happened, and so on – but also an instant judgment on the most important aspect of the game. In question form, writers must ask: Why is this game different? Why should someone take a moment to look at a cell phone and read this story? If students can master the communication and analytical skills demanded by sports, they can write about elections or natural disasters or complicated legal cases. They can write about anything.

The less I talk, the more they learn _ How do I get students to a place where they improve as writers? Not with war stories, or long lectures. A pillar of my teaching philosophy, learned through experience, is that the more I push them to engage, the better students respond. In my classroom, undergraduates routinely practice skills through exercises that involve competition, breaking into small teams as they try to come up with, for instance, the best lead to a story, or the most provocative column idea. They must defend their work as I critique their efforts. In the end, the students judged to be the winners often get silly, low-stakes prizes (example, a lanyard). Nothing motivates sports people like a trophy.

It's not just about the classroom, it's about impact _ My belief in student engagement extends far beyond exercises in class. Students begin by writing their first game story at a class bowling tournament and quickly move into covering Penn State sports. All the while, I give them detailed feedback on their frequent assignments. Once they have completed the Sports Writing class, smaller teams of undergraduates work with me at major events, producing content that is published by professional partners such as The Associated Press and USA Today Sports Network. During my tenure, we've covered Penn State football in Ireland, baseball in Cuba, the U.S. Open (men's golf), the Rio Paralympics, the Little League World Series and more, making sure to capture the cultural aspects of the event and not just the final score. Students' development skyrockets in these settings, and many have won awards and launched into successful professional careers at outlets such as ESPN and Sports Illustrated.

Instructors have to learn, too _ In 22 years at the AP, I never took a photo for a story. I was interviewed on TV or the radio perhaps a dozen times. I was an editor and a writer. Here at Penn State, in just the past year, I've produced an award-winning sports documentary, taken my first multimedia workshop, broken the 1,000-follower barrier on Twitter and penned several thought pieces on the state of sports and sports journalism. Our students are moving into a world where they must be masters of all platforms and it is incumbent on me not to be permanently frozen in the early part of this decade. My students are excited by the opportunities to learn and grow at this university, and I want – indeed, need – to learn with them, knowing that the skills developed in sports writing have far-reaching applications.