

Backwards by Design report  
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## **How applying threshold concepts helped my news writing and media ethics classes**

I attended a Backwards by Design retreat in August 2016. The insights I gained from the retreat played a significant role in making my Journalism 207 and Journalism 351 classes more productive and inspiring for my students.

Journalism 207 is an introductory news writing class and Journalism 351 is a media ethics course. Journalism 207, as one would expect, has frequent writing assignments. Journalism 351 is a class with much in-class discussion and many in-class exercises. However, there is also a strong writing component, as students must research and write a 2,000-word essay on an ethical issue, compare the ethics and effectiveness of two competing public relations campaigns, or conduct a media audit of coverage of a news event or issue. As I'll show in this report, because of the insights gained at the Backwards by Design retreat, I have increased the writing component of Journalism 351.

In sessions at the Backwards by Design retreat, I was introduced to the idea of "threshold concepts," which I suppose I was familiar with intuitively but to which I had never applied a name.

During workshops at the retreat, I developed two threshold concepts that either reinforced some teaching techniques I was using or prompted me to introduce new techniques.

I developed two threshold concepts:

1: Journalism is an ethical act and a collaborative practice and instruction should reinforce and encourage this notion.

2: More frequent, “low-stakes” (though I quibble with the term) writing assignments result in greater student engagement with the course and improved writing and critical thinking skills.

Here’s how I applied these concepts to the two courses:

### **Journalism 207:**

An element of the first threshold concept—the notion of collaboration—reinforced for me and helped me improve a component I had recently introduced to the course: Beginning every class with a news meeting.

These news meetings mimic similar meetings that are regularly held at news organizations around the world. Editors of various sections and genres gather to discuss the major news events in their areas and then make a decision about how to rank and use these stories in their publications or programs, whether websites, newspapers, social media or television.

I divide the class into three teams: National/International; Local-regional/Business; and Sports/Entertainment/Lifestyle. Members of the teams work collaboratively to find the most important news stories of the day and well-written examples of those stories. It was my hope that having students work together on these daily projects would demonstrate to them the value of collaboration and collegiality to the journalism profession. Indeed, at a time when the profession is under existential attack from the White House and other politicians, collaboration will be necessary to survival.

Students have responded positively to the news meetings. There is evidence they see themselves as a team. For example, students routinely share their reporters’ notes on news stories I have assigned the group. I encourage this practice to foster collaboration.

Also, since introducing the news meetings in the course, student answers on quiz questions that deal with best practices of journalism have improved. Student comments in course evaluations have singled out the news meetings for praise. Other instructors who have observed the class have said they plan to adopt the concept.

There is another important benefit: Increased media literacy in students.

In addition to being the gateway course for journalism majors, Journalism 207 serves as a General University Requirement (GUR) course. So there are many students in Journalism 207 who do not plan to be journalists or public relations professionals. Even if a Journalism 207 student has no plans to become a communications professional, he or she benefits by becoming a more sophisticated news consumer. This is especially important in an era of “fake news.” This is essential to the survival of our democracy.

## **Journalism 351**

Both threshold concepts have had significant impact on my media ethics course.

We examine six case studies that illustrate ethical dilemmas faced by journalists. We look at how ethical theories (ends-based, rule-based and care-based thinking) and common dilemma paradigms (individual vs. community, justice vs. mercy, short term vs. long term, truth vs. loyalty) can help us make sense of dilemmas.

Using the first threshold concept of collaboration, I assign groups of three to five students to work together on doing a presentation and leading a class discussion on their dilemma. It has been gratifying to see how the students dig in and take charge of “their” dilemma, working as a team to come up with a solution that is ethically and journalistically sound. The language of ethical theory and of Society of Professional Journalists ethics guidelines becomes a part of students’ everyday conversations, “teaching” these concepts in a way that no amount of one-to-many lectures can accomplish.

Using the second threshold concept of doing more “low stakes” writing assignments, I have significantly changed the writing component of the course in a way that deepens student understanding of the concepts discussed in the course.

In previous quarters, I had assigned a few study questions and chosen two case studies for 1,500-word “decision papers,” in addition to the end-of-quarter 2,000-word ethics essay mentioned above.

After developing the second threshold concept at the Backward by Design retreat, I decided to assign more study questions and require shorter study-question type responses on the six case studies, in addition to the end-of-quarter essay.

The result: Because they are writing much more frequently (at less length), students develop greater and earlier familiarity with ethical theory, dilemma paradigms and journalism guidelines. Instead of “saving” their knowledge and demonstrating on a small number of larger papers near the end of the quarter, they are essentially “living” their knowledge of the world of ethics throughout the quarter.

It’s difficult to put a metric on the improved understanding of the concepts, but I can say that students do demonstrate such understanding earlier in the course. I’ve also seen marked improvements in students’ writing skills as they write more frequently.

I’m sure I will see other benefits from the introduction of these threshold concepts to my courses in coming quarters. I’m happy to share these insights with other instructors.