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EntertainmentManagementOnline.com: Integrating an Online Publication into the Entertainment Management Curriculum

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Abstract

Effective writing within music and entertainment courses is important for students aspiring to become successful entertainment business professionals. This article describes an integrated writing project used to enhance student writing and industry knowledge in the entertainment management curriculum at Missouri State University. Rationale for starting a student-generated publication will be discussed, along with the complete editorial process used to publish a weekly online magazine. It will also reveal preliminary student feedback about the integrated writing project, and make recommendations for improvements. After reading this article, educators should be able to launch a similar online publication using the editorial model described.

Introduction

It is commonly regarded that good writing skills are critical for maximized productivity and success within the workplace, regardless of industry. Appleman (2009) suggests that studies have shown poor writing in the workplace leads to hours of wasted time and money. It can also lead to negative impressions from co-workers (Beason 2001). Beason found that grammar errors in workplace writings, regardless of severity, provoke negative responses from co-workers. Although “to err is human,” and, therefore, a stray writing error should not provoke judgment of a professional’s competence, the negative reaction still remains. This is not surprising, considering over ninety-six percent of those polled believe writing skills are still important in the corporate world (*Wall Street Journal* 2011).

The importance of good writing is equally paramount for professionals within the entertainment industry. Individuals who work within entertainment management must write effectively over a variety of mediums

for a variety of audiences. These written pieces may include press releases, press kits, contracts, show announcements, blogs, websites, general email correspondence, sponsorship proposals, show reviews, etc. The ability to clearly communicate key points about an artist, a tour, or a show is important in creating the intended appeal to media, fans, and sponsors. Smith (2011, 46) claims effective writing skills are critical for successful progression from student to professional, to manager, or to executive within any career path. Students in academic entertainment programs may avoid negative generalizations from future coworkers (Beason 2001), and move further along their career paths if they can write more effectively.

Academic programs in music and entertainment have taken notice, and have responded with innovative approaches to improve the writing skills of their students. The University of the Pacific uses seminars to place emphasis on effective writing skills by having students conduct research and information synthesis (Chase and Hatschek 2010, 134). Emphasis on teaching writing skills was implemented into Pacific's seminars after a 2001 survey of alumni from the university's Music Management Program identified "written communication skills" as a key attribute to attaining success in the music industry (Chase and Hatschek 2010, 141). Full Sail University highlights the emergence of a variety of information delivery channels within the entertainment industry and teaches students a "trans-media approach to writing" (*Creative Writing for Entertainment* 2012). This approach recognizes the role of effective writing across multiple platforms, including social networking, mobile devices, and emerging platforms. Students at the Berklee College of Music write for an online publication, the *Music Business Journal*. The *Music Business Journal* publishes seven issues per year—three in the fall, three in the spring, and one in the summer (*Music Business Journal* 2011). The *Music Business Journal* is similar in content to the publication that will be outlined in this article, *EntertainmentManagementOnline.com*. These integrated writing programs are examples of how educators are recognizing the importance of strong writing skills across a variety of platforms for a successful career in the entertainment industry.

A Student-Generated Publication: A Means and an End

While it is accurate to say that publishing an online magazine can be the end-goal of an integrated writing project within the entertainment business curriculum, it is also accurate to say publishing an online magazine

can be the means to creating better writers who are also more knowledgeable about the entertainment industry. And, just as there are benefits and challenges associated with incorporating a student-run music label (Butler 2007), launching a student-generated online publication has its own set of hurdles and rewards.

The initial idea for creating a student-generated online publication came as a result of a micro-grant program that Missouri State University offered to professors who wanted to implement innovative teaching methods in the classroom. As a result of receiving approximately US\$4,500 in seed money from the micro-grant program, an online magazine called *EntertainmentManagementOnline.com* was launched in 2001. (The terms “magazine,” “publication,” and “portal” will be used interchangeably throughout this article.)

Two primary goals and two secondary goals were identified that related to the integrated writing project.

The two primary goals were to 1) improve student writing, and 2) increase the students’ industry knowledge by having students create informative content through classroom assignments to serve an audience of “aspiring and seasoned entertainment professionals” (Rothschild 2012).

There is support in favor of reaching these goals. Smith insists, “Poor student writing can be dramatically improved when business professors devote small portions of class time to helping students learn to spot and eliminate common errors in composition” (Smith 2011, 42).

Lapp, Shea, and Wosley (2011) assert writing skills are enhanced when students understand their writing is utilized in a purposeful manner. Students may revise writing more carefully because a larger audience than just the professor will view their work. Further, Stout (2010) maintains that any kind of writing can clarify thinking, but we tend to spend more time and care when we intend to publish.

Heitin (2011) points out that writing for an online platform can spur engagement among, and creativity within, students in ways that conventional writing cannot. She claims that writing in the workplace has shifted from lengthy reports to concise articles that integrate text, audio, images, and outside links. She references online job and school applications, stating digital written assignments “match the real world” (Heitin 2011, 34).

Finally, properly constructed writing assignments can also help students connect with the discipline (Stout 2010) and increase their motivation and learning (Hulleman and Harackiewicz 2009).

As technology inevitably evolves, digital writing will become more and more prevalent, and skills surrounding online publications, email writing, synthesizing, and creating short reports will be critical in the workplace (Heitin 2011). Heitin encourages educators to implement digital writing components into their curriculum to better prepare students for career writing.

Secondary goals have been to 1) inspire students to contribute to their industry, and 2) enhance the visibility of the academic program. Even though this paper focuses on how the integrated writing project goes about achieving the two primary goals, these secondary goals deserve a brief explanation.

On June 15, 1995, Missouri legislators signed into law Senate Bill 340 (Public Affairs Mission) which gave Missouri State University a state-wide mission in public affairs. This mission defines a “primary way in which a Missouri State education is different from that of other universities and one way by which we educate our students to imagine the future.” Among several goals of this public affairs mission is for students to “recognize the importance of contributing their knowledge and experiences to their own community and the broader society.” As such, one of the secondary goals of the integrated writing project has been for students to view their writing for an audience of “aspiring and seasoned entertainment professionals” as a form of public service—a way of giving back to the community.

The other secondary goal is increasing the visibility of our institution’s entertainment management curriculum. This goal is accomplished by increasing our online footprint through search engine-optimized postings. Consequently, this increases website unique visits and email subscriptions by entertainment students and industry professionals seeking the kind of content provided on our website.

The following describes the model used to achieve the primary goals of improving student writing and increasing student industry knowledge in hopes that other educators may borrow from the editorial process and launch their own online publications.

Content of EntertainmentManagementOnline.com

The primary content of the online magazine includes three sections: 1) weekly news summaries, 2) career profiles, and 3) interview transcripts. All three sections are graded classroom assignments. Weekly news sum-

maries are summarized articles from approved entertainment industry trade publications. These summarized news stories are posted weekly on the web portal *EntertainmentManagementOnline.com*, and sent by email to subscribers in the form of an eNewsletter during the fall and spring semesters. Career profiles are larger assignments in which students create extensive reports outlining the specific careers they are interested in pursuing within the industry. The profile includes a description of the career position, responsibilities, employment opportunities, earnings, essential skills, experience, and qualifications. The career profile also requires students to conduct a recorded interview with a professional in the position of interest. This interview is typed verbatim, and included within the career profile. The interview is also repurposed as a separate type of primary content, interview transcripts. The career profiles and interview transcripts are prepared once per course with the intended audience being aspiring entertainment professionals. News summaries, on the other hand, are prepared for weekly distribution and intended for both aspiring and seasoned industry professionals.

Secondary content found on *EntertainmentManagementOnline.com* includes book reviews, how-to excerpts, polls and surveys, internship announcements, a directory of resources, links to trade associations, and information about the Entertainment Management Program at Missouri State University (Rothschild 2012). Although this material was intended to be a prominent part of the online publication during the model's development stages, this content is a lower priority and is not regularly updated.

The news summaries constitute the most frequently updated content on *EntertainmentManagementOnline.com*. The editorial process used to produce this weekly publication follows.

The Editorial Team and Content Management System (CMS)

The editorial team is comprised of many contributors (students), an editor (graduate assistant), and the publisher (professor).

Each fall and spring semester, students from two sections of the same course are assigned the role of contributor. In our case, there are approximately sixty students that are split into two groups (Group A and Group B). Group A is assigned to submit news summaries one week, while Group B is assigned to submit news summaries the following week. In all, each student will submit five to six news summaries every two weeks over a sixteen-week semester. A graduate student who has the ability to read

quickly and identify grammar and spelling errors is carefully selected for the role of editor. The editor spends approximately ten hours per week editing and publishing the news summaries. The publisher/manager (i.e., the professor) spends two hours per week outside of class grading the news summaries, giving written feedback to the students and answering questions from the editor about fit and style. To maintain quality and consistency, the professor and graduate student editor must agree on the standards for publication. The publisher/manager uses approximately three class periods reviewing writing guidelines and providing instructions on how to use the web-based content management system (CMS).

EntertainmentManagementOnline.com uses a CMS called New Digital Group Online Publishing Solution. This platform allows students to log on to a website as correspondents (contributors) for their assigned writing group. From there, students claim, write, and edit news summaries. The graduate student editor receives email notices of the submissions, edits the submissions in the CMS, and cues the news summaries for posting. Approved news summaries are automatically distilled into a weekly email sent to subscribers by a click of a button. A variety of low-cost content management systems are available that would effectively serve the purpose of an online publication and a distributed email newsletter. We recommend the highly regarded WordPress platform, as this ubiquitous blogging software is free to download, requires minimal design and coding knowledge, and allows for a variety of functions (or widgets) to be added including email utilities, RSS capabilities, commenting, and integration of social media, among others. At the time of this writing, we are currently migrating to the WordPress platform.

Important considerations when choosing a CMS include selecting a system that is internet-based (not desktop-based software) and web browser agnostic; this ensures the CMS platform is easily accessible from any home or public computer. The system should also contain varying administrator statuses with differing permissions. These permissions should vary for a correspondent, the student who may claim, write, and edit articles; an editor, the graduate student who may edit and publish submissions; and publisher/manager, the professor who may oversee and manage all roles, submissions, and other published work. The system should also have capacity for email or RSS (real simple syndication) distribution of published content. Through email or RSS distribution, the publication should result in more visits to the online publication portal because it will automati-

cally push content to subscribers who may not regularly visit the site. In addition, the CMS should have a commenting function so readers may add feedback directly to news summaries. A major advantage of using online publications within academia is the comment function, as this type of feedback allows for “social construction of knowledge and meaning making” (Hashemi and Najafi 2011, 600). Immediate feedback, especially when it is from the intended readers of an article, is more helpful in shaping writing abilities than even slightly delayed feedback from a professor (Lapp, Shea, and Wosley 2011). To track website traffic, the CMS should have Google Analytics enabled, a code that tracks the number of page views, site visitors (new and returning), and the manner in which visitors access content.

Student Training and Resources

At the outset of each semester, students are provided with training and job aids to assist in the writing and submission process. Student training includes detailed feedback on a “practice” article all students must summarize, and continuous feedback on biweekly written news summaries throughout the course. All students are required to summarize the same practice article to understand how to synthesize relevant information from an article. The practice article is necessary for students, as many have not previously written for an online publication. The resulting “practice” news summary allows a student to understand the online submission process and clarify the professor’s instructions. During the class period after the practice news summary is due, the professor reviews the edited summaries with all students, and explains what relevant information should have been synthesized from the original article, and reviews commonly-made writing and formatting errors. As students write biweekly news summaries throughout the semester, immediate feedback is given to students the class period following the due date, in the form of a printed and corrected version of the submission.

To reinforce the above-mentioned training, students are provided resources to improve their writing throughout the semester. These resources include a detailed writing guidelines document, a how-to-submit reminder card, and access to the graduate student editor.

The writing guidelines document is critical to student success. The document serves as an in-depth explanation of *EntertainmentManagementOnline.com* and a point of reference for student correspondents.

The writing guidelines are explained to students in a single class period and divided into the following sections: purpose, news summaries overview, choosing an article, claiming an article, formatting and submitting, grading, extra points, successful writing tips, and a plagiarism statement (Rothschild 2012).

The successful writing tips section of the guidelines aids students in drafting news summaries. Because contributing writers are upper-level students, it is expected that correspondents have received previous writing instruction, and a full course in effective writing is not necessary. Due to varying levels of proficiency, however, the tips within the writing guidelines provide a reference of common writing errors to avoid, i.e., semicolon usage, active/passive voice, capitalization rules, etc. (Rothschild 2012, 7-11). The writing guidelines also contain style guidelines. Style guidelines differ from what are commonly referred to as grammar rules. Whereas most publications follow generally accepted grammar rules such as those found in William Strunk, Jr.'s classic writing guide, *The Elements of Style*, publications may adopt various style guidelines. These variances in style and formatting may include the capitalization of titles, the format of dates, and whether percentages are written in numerical form or not. For example, the *Hollywood Reporter* and *Billboard* capitalize nearly every word in article titles, whereas *USA Today* capitalizes only the first. By defining a publication style, the online magazine maintains a consistent format.

The plagiarism statement found at the conclusion of the writing guidelines is a contract signed by students as a commitment to original writing (Rothschild 2012, 12). Though every article is not individually scanned for plagiarism, a spot audit is conducted if submissions appear plagiarized. Given the availability of online articles, it is important to guard against shortcuts such as copying, pasting, changing a few words, and submitting as original work.

The reminder card is a business card-size reference for student correspondents to use while drafting biweekly news summaries. The card contains basic information including the URL of the CMS, log-in information, the procedure to claim an article, and the procedure to submit a news summary.

The graduate student editor, who is responsible for the majority of the weekly publication process, is available to students via email and scheduled office hours. Students may contact the editor about any ques-

tions or issues regarding the CMS or their submissions.

The Article Selection Process

Students must choose to summarize articles from pre-approved sources only, and the original article must have been published within the nine days prior to the submission deadline (Rothschild 2012). This is important to ensure current news is covered. A pre-approved list of ten sources is outlined within the writing guidelines, including trade publications such as *Billboard*, *Sports Business Journal*, the *Wall Street Journal*, *USA Today*, and others. These approved news sources are predetermined by the publisher to avoid students turning to less credible and often biased blogs, company websites, etc.

Students must choose an article that will be of interest to the target audience of “aspiring and seasoned industry professionals,” is not an opinion piece, and must not have been previously summarized or “claimed” by any other student (Rothschild 2012). To ensure an article has not been previously summarized, and another student has not already placed a claim to summarize a given article, a decision tree is helpful. Figure 1 outlines the article claiming process.

The step-by-step process students must follow to claim an article is important to ensure only one summary is written per article. Students may not claim their article until after the weekly email is delivered to subscribers for the week (Rothschild 2012). By enforcing this policy, the editor

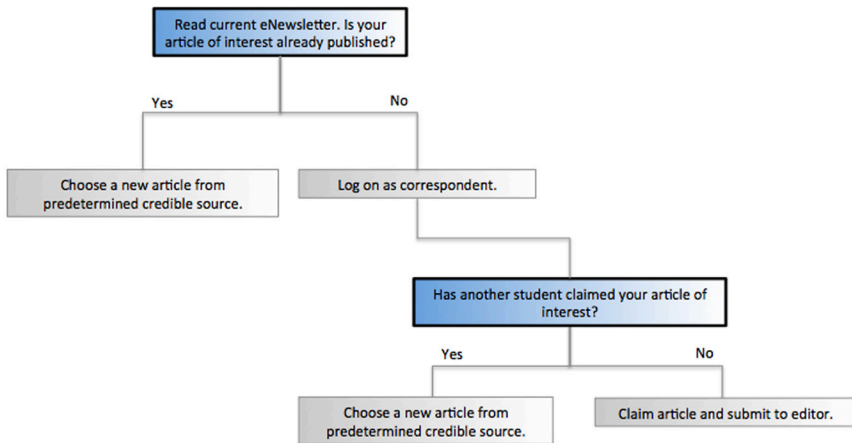


Figure 1. Selecting an appropriate article.

will receive submissions that are current and not redundant.

The claiming an article section of the writing guidelines walks the student through the click-by-click process of claiming an article within the CMS using screenshots (Rothschild 2012, 3-4). In the formatting and submitting section of the writing guidelines, the process of uploading images and providing references, a tagline, and an alternative title for images is explained (Rothschild 2012, 5-6). The grading section outlines precisely what errors students will lose points for (i.e., not writing within the 300-350 word count, misspellings, grammatical errors) and extra points students can earn (Rothschild 2012, 7).

Acceptance Rate and Grading Process

As a rule of thumb, only about sixty percent of all submissions will be published. To appeal to students' interests and to publish a variety of content, the model allows all students to initially request to summarize news articles on one of four topics: events, music, sports, or venues. In addition to a variety of topics, students are split into two groups; these two groups alternate writing news summaries for *EntertainmentManagementOnline.com* each week. Two smaller groups of thirty students submitting every other week is also much more manageable than a larger group of sixty students submitting every week. This schedule allows the graduate student editor and professor to edit and grade thirty news summaries within twenty-four hours of submission, and provide detailed feedback on student writing within a few days of submission. The weekly editorial and publication process is displayed in Figure 2.

Student Perceptions

We are able to glean some student reactions to writing for *EntertainmentManagementOnline.com* from student opinion surveys. The end-of-course surveys provide quantitative and qualitative data. Quantitative data is drawn from questions utilizing a four-point Likert scale (see Table 1); qualitative data is drawn from questions soliciting open-ended written responses.

Although sample size precludes us from making any statistically significant claims about the data, students generally expressed positive feedback in response to the survey questions and more negative feedback when responding to open-ended questions. Themes drawn from the quantitative and qualitative data include generally positive feedback toward an

increase in knowledge of current events, specific career paths, the industry as a whole, and an improvement in writing ability (Survey Results 2003, 2012). Negative feedback includes dislike of written coursework within a non-writing course, feelings of an overabundance of significant writing assignments, and a lack of seeing the assignments as directly benefiting

	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
Student Correspondent	News summary submissions due by 1:00 pm	May claim article for following week after reviewing publication at 1:00 pm	
Editor	Editorial review process* begins after submissions received at 1:00 pm	Publishes news summaries by 1:00 pm	
Professor			Reviews edits and grades to return to students by following class period

***Editorial Review Process (24 hours)**

- 1) Editor prints unedited summaries submitted through content management system (CMS).
- 2) Editor marks grammatical and spelling errors.
- 3) Editor makes decision on whether topic has been covered in prior week;
 - a) If the topic has been thoroughly covered previously, the article will not be published, regardless of errors or writing quality. Student will receive full credit for completing the assignment.
 - b) If the topic has not been thoroughly covered, the article will be considered against other submissions for publication.
- 4) Editor chooses ten to fifteen articles to publish with varying topics and high quality writing.
- 5) Editor edits selected articles using CMS and presses “approve.” Approval publishes selected articles and sends series of excerpts through email to subscribers and automatically posts to online publication.
- 6) Editor provides printed copies with corrections to professor for grading and for return to students the following class period.

Figure 2. Weekly editing and publishing process.

industry professionals (Survey Results 2003, 2012).

Although student feedback is generally positive, future steps can be taken to improve the experience for students. First, students need to understand how vital writing skills are to succeed in a professional role in the entertainment business. The professor can express this importance to students with evidence from professionals within the entertainment industry regarding the need for strong writing skills. If this evidence is seen as credible by students, effort toward building strong writing skills may be pursued. To better provide feedback for students, a “comment” function needs to be added to all news summaries so individual students can receive feedback from readers. To illustrate the public service students are putting forth, the professor should announce figures about site visits and the number of subscribers regularly added, easily drawn from Google Analytics. Reader feedback should be passed directly along to students. Feedback from industry professionals regarding *EntertainmentManagementOnline.com* has not been regularly gathered, though email feedback from subscribers has been intermittently received. Reader surveys could also be implemented as a means of assessing the value of the publication.

Recommendations for the Future

Over the past twelve years, the model has evolved from including a variety of different student assignments to focusing nearly solely on

Question	Agreed	Disagreed
Increased knowledge of current issues within entertainment industry	97%	3%
Increased ability to write for an online publication	86%	14%
Felt assignments aided in career preparation	84%	16%
Would recommend assignments to future students	78%	22%
Felt assignments were a service to professionals	68%	32%
Written feedback aided in improving writing skills	66%	34%
Assignments improved writing skills	64%	36%

Table 1. Student perceptions.

weekly news summaries. We would recommend any department seeking to implement an online publication into its curriculum begin with a narrow focus to better serve readers, and to extract higher quality work from student writers. Additionally, we recommend the implementation of webcasts as resources for the online publication, in addition to written resources. For example, a video and audio webcast of the process of using the online platform would be more effective and accessible for students learning to navigate the content management system. A webcast or slideshow of common writing mistakes may also be more accessible for students than a written document.

Any innovative method to enhance the writing skills of future leaders in the entertainment industry will only strengthen the professionalism of our industry. Integrating publishable writing into the curriculum is not obstacle-free, but it is an important part of preparing students for a successful career within the entertainment business. Though current students may not be fully receptive to writing across the curriculum, many see the vast benefits drawn from regular writing upon entering their professions. Young professionals with sufficient writing skills and a deeper understanding of the entertainment industry will see greater opportunity for early advancement within their careers.

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