Tackling the Challenge of Mobile in the Classroom: Using Boundary-Free Storytelling to Inspire Students' Professional Growth

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Abstract

Students face immense challenges in developing the skills necessary to produce content for consumption in a mobile environment. Not only is it a quickly changing medium, requiring immense flexibility with the tools used to create content, but mobile devices are giving students the ability to tell a story in any way they see fit – be it text, photos, videos or all of the above. This case study examined via pre- and post-test responses students' perceptions of boundary-free storytelling—a limitless exploration of mobile devices, content delivery and message development. However, the act of pushing the students beyond their comfort zones uncovered some gaps in news consumption, technology exposure and confidence with traditional videography. Armed with their assessments, students left the course with a better understanding of mobile content delivery and, perhaps more importantly, a list of areas for growth they need to strengthen before entering the communications industry. The article offers recommendations for enhancing current curricula to help students embrace challenges and tackle the unknown—the only constant in the ever-changing communications industry.

Keywords: mobile, multimedia, journalism education, advertising education, electronic media curriculum, tablets

Tackling the Challenge of Mobile in the Classroom:
Using Boundary-Free Storytelling to Inspire Students' Professional Growth

Students face immense challenges in developing the skills necessary to produce content for consumption in a mobile environment. Not only is it a quickly changing medium, requiring immense flexibility with the tools used to create content, but mobile devices are giving students the ability to tell a story in any way they see fit – be it text, photos, videos, or all of the above. This study examined via pre- and post-test responses students' perceptions of boundary-free storytelling—a limitless exploration of mobile devices, content delivery and message development. However, the act of pushing the students beyond their comfort zones uncovered some gaps in news consumption, technology exposure and confidence with traditional videography. Armed with their assessments, students left the course with a better understanding of mobile content delivery and, perhaps more importantly, a list of areas for growth they need to strengthen before entering the communications industry.

Literature Review

Since 2009, the number of graduates required to produce content for a mobile device has doubled (Becker, et al., 2012, p. 38), yet only 11 percent have the ability to produce content for mobile devices (p. 54). And, while a study of 2011 bachelor's degree recipients found more than seven out of 10 graduates reported they were able to write for the web, edit for the web, use and create blogs, and use social media professionally, only small percentages of graduates reported having other skills that are essential in the current media environment (Becker, Vlad & Kalpen, 2012, p. 1). However, understanding students' technical abilities is only part of the equation.

Educators must also examine how students gather news and interact with media to shape curricula that expands the horizon of the media landscape.

Only four in 10 of the 2011 bachelor's degree recipients reported reading a newspaper the day before completing the survey. Less than half reported reading a magazine the day before, and the percentage of students who reported watching television news also continued to decline in 2011. The percentage of graduates in 2011 who listened to radio news remained unchanged from a year ago, at four in 10, as did the 75 percent of the graduates who reported viewing news online the day before. That figure is basically unchanged going back to 2007. Yet, the percentage of graduates who reported getting news on a mobile device continued to increase in 2011. Following online news and television is now the most common way of getting news (Becker, et al., 2012, p. 8-9). While this data does not differentiate the online news category from the mobile category, data from other sources implies strong growth in mobile consumption among younger adults. Nearly three out of four teens say they access the Internet on cell phones, tablets and other mobile devices at least occasionally, with one in four teens saying they are cell-mostly Internet users (Madden, Lenhart, Duggan, Cortesi & Gasser, 2013, p. 2).

This behavior is not unique to the young. Like teens, 74 percent of American adults under the age of 50 say they access the Internet on cell phones, tablets and other mobile devices, too (Madden, et al., 2013, p. 4). And globally, mobile devices now account for 13 percent of Internet traffic (Hall, 2013). In fact, worldwide mobile broadband subscriptions have grown from 268 million in 2007 to 2.1 billion in 2013—an average annual growth rate of 40 percent ("The World in 2013," 2013, p. 6). This includes an 89 percent penetration rate in "developing countries," which currently have the highest mobile growth rates (p. 1), perhaps because mobile broadband is often cheaper than wired broadband in developing countries (p. 7).

As a result, the overall sales figures of smartphones and tablets do not come as a surprise. The year 2012 saw a 78.4 percent growth year-over-year when compared to 2011. The projected growth rate of smart devices from 2012 to 2017 is 174.5 percent. During the same period, smartphone sales are expected to grow 109.9 percent and portable PCs will grow 19.3 percent (Lomas, 2013). With such growth, it seems likely that educators can expect students to have strong working knowledge of the mobile medium. But, Lomas's survey leaves room for question, as "mobile device" is the only characterization used for a category that can include smartphones, tablets and even laptops in certain situations. A more specific analysis of tablets shows impressive growth.

Annual tablet sales will hit nearly 500 million units by 2015 according to a report by BI Intelligence, predicting tablet sales to grow at better than a 50 percent compound annual rate. That will exceed the number of PCs currently sold per year (approximately 360 million). This figure also includes e-readers (Gobry, 2012).

Teens and young adults are receiving increased exposure to tablets in their schools. Apple sold 1 million iPads to high schools and colleges this year, doubling year-over-year sales to schools. News Corporation and AT&T developed a partnership to provide tablet-based learning products to K-12 schools. Orlando Science School students maintaining a pre-determined GPA will be issued an iPad for use at home and school (Lytle, 2012). And the Johnston Community School District in Johnston, Iowa, has embarked on a 1:1 initiative in which all high school students and staff are issued iPads for curriculum activities ("1:1 Digital Learning," 2012).

Tablet ownership among college students and college-bound seniors has tripled, with nearly half of them saying they will buy another in the next six months. They believe tablets are

valuable educational tools and nearly 60 percent prefer e-reading for class or for fun, the first time digital publications beat printed texts ("Pearson Foundation," 2012). But, a detail in the Pearson Foundation survey creates cause for concern: the college students who said they would buy a tablet in the next six months are *current* tablet owners, not those entering the market for the first time. Further analysis of tablet ownership reinforces the concern.

As of September 2010, 4 percent of all U.S. adults owned tablets, with that number growing to 25 percent in August 2012 (Rainie, 2012). A breakdown of the age of ownership in January 2012 shows exactly who owned tablets at that time: 24 percent of those ages 18-29, 27 percent of those ages 30-49, 15 percent of those ages 50-64, and 7 percent of those ages 65+. Particularly noteworthy was the growth during the 2011 holiday season: ownership among those ages 18-64 nearly doubled (Rainie, Zickuhr, Purcell, Madden & Brenner, 2012, p. 30). But an analysis of ownership as of August 2012 shows growth is slow in the younger population: 25 percent of those 18-29, 31 percent of those 30-49, 27 percent of those 50-64, and 13 percent of those 65+. All are significant increases except those ages 18-29 (Rainie, 2012).

Zickhur and Madden (2012) found similar growth in tablet purchases among older adults. As of February 2012, four times as many seniors owned e-book readers as in 2010, and tablet ownership increased from 1 percent in 2010 to 8 percent. And, traditionally, this is the generation that has been seen as being the least technologically savvy. E-book readers cannot be overlooked, as many have mobile connectivity and can be used to read magazines and other electronic publications.

Cost seems to be somewhat of a factor. Forty-six percent of those who own tablets live in households making $75,000 or more (Rainie, 2012). And the education level of family members

and income levels of the household are strong indicators for teen tablet ownership (Madden, et al., 2013, p. 5). In fact, 25 percent of those 16+ years of age who don't own a tablet report cost as being a factor. But, there also seems to be a lack of interest; 35 percent report they don't need or want a tablet, and 20 percent report they are happy with their current device (Rainie, et al., 2012, p. 38). This disinterest was also evident during the 2012 holiday season. Seventeen percent of kids wanted a laptop for the 2012 holiday, while 15 percent wanted the latest iPhone. Only 9 percent wanted a 10" tablet. More than two in 10 teens ages 16-18 wanted a laptop ("Laptops Beat iPhones," 2012).

The worldwide growth of mobile technology across multiple demographics demands that students acquire the skills necessary to produce content for tablets and mobile devices for years to come. This study suggests that an undergraduate curriculum can be enhanced when faculty help students embrace challenges and create a culture of adventure when tackling the unknown—particularly when exposing students to new technology and media. As this study shows, student exposure to both a new medium and innovative approaches to content delivery expands students' perceptions of what is possible, bringing true boundary-free storytelling to life in a mobile world. Such approaches prepare the next generation of communications professionals to collaborate and innovate in an ever-changing communication industry.

Methodology

The researchers used pre- and post-test surveys to gather student responses in one course taught in a School of Journalism and Mass Communication at a private, mid-sized, midwestern university. The sample was drawn from an advanced advertising strategy class composed of students in their final year of study. All were over 21 years of age. They were Creative

Advertising majors and minors, with emphases in copywriting and/or visual design. Students in the course were tasked with writing and producing content for an iPad publication to be launched in the iTunes store. The students used Adobe InDesign enhanced with an open-source app design tool, Mag+. All students, whether copy or design focused, had previous classroom experience with InDesign, but none had ever used Mag+.

Sixteen advanced advertising strategy students were tasked with preparing an interactive, fully functioning piece that promoted the public relations major on campus. Intentionally, the faculty gave limited guidance in terms of a deliverable in the course. The students were expected to gather information and make sound decisions based upon the "client" needs. Students met with faculty responsible for the project, gathered anecdotal stories to add personality to the work and assembled general information about potential audiences for the piece. Students in the course were expected to gather additional information from the "client" as needed, and they used additional census and regional governmental data, demographic information and other resources to determine the appropriate tone and content for the piece. Students were given one month to complete the project.

Prior to announcing the project, students completed a survey during a regularly scheduled class session (Appendix I). The students were given the option to refuse participation without any consequence, but all opted to complete the survey. The survey assessed ownership and usage of mobile devices (particularly tablets), experience in mobile product creation and skill with various multimedia creation software applications. Students were asked to assess their personal mindset with regard to their professional work, with key questions focused on students' self-reported comfort with adventure, risk and challenges in their profession. Upon completion of the

project, the students were asked to complete the same survey once more. Again, all opted to respond.

Results

Based upon their research and the "client needs," 16 students in the advanced advertising strategy course prepared an "interactive brochure" for the public relations major. The piece essentially functioned as an application for a tablet, and the students presented the work on an iPad. The piece included video, audio and other design elements, including infographics designed for the major. The "brochure" featured real-time social media updates from faculty and students, and the content included multiple multimedia links. The students gathered feedback from current and prospective public relations students to confirm the piece fit the needs of the target audience.

Examining the pre- and post-test survey responses, it is evident that the project had effects on the students. Initially, only six of the students had used iPads for business or educational purposes. At the end of the project, all 16 had been exposed to the technology for these purposes. One student actually purchased a tablet and another student purchased an e-reader as a result of the course. In addition, in the pre-test, nine students reported how they spent their total time on tablets. Of the nine respondents, eight used the tablet to search the Internet and play games for more than 80 percent of their total usage. In contrast, when asked to report their tablet usage in the post-test survey, 10 participants provided responses that were more evenly dispersed among many options, including taking photographs, creating or modifying Microsoft Office or Google documents, and watching video.

Students were asked to report their ability to use a number of programs introduced and used throughout the School of Journalism and Mass Communication curriculum. Average scores for pre- and post-test responses are shared in Table 1 below. A seven-point Likert scale was used for assessment, where "1" meant "Not at all Capable," and "7" meant "Extremely Capable."

Table 1: Advanced Advertising Strategy Students' Self-Reported Ability to Use Design Programs*

Name of Program	**Pre-Test Average Scores**	**Post-Test Average Scores**
iMovie	4.9	5.3
InDesign	6.2	6.3
Illustrator	5.3	5.3
Photoshop	6.3	6.3
Acrobat	4.3	4.8

**7-point Likert scale, where "1" meant "Not at all Capable," and "7" meant "Extremely Capable."*

In addition, the survey used a five-point Likert scale, where "5" meant "Agree" and "1" meant "Disagree," to assess students' confidence in their videography and video editing skills. While students reported an average score of 3.9 and 3.6, respectively (up from 3.3 for both in the pre-test), it is important to view the change in individual student responses after the project (Table 2).

Table 2: Advanced Advertising Strategy Students' Self-Reported Confidence in Videography and Video Editing Skills

	Confidence in Videography Skills			**Confidence in Video Editing Skills**		
Possible Responses	Pre-Test Responses	Post-Test Responses	Total Change	Pre-Test Responses	Post-Test Responses	Total Change
5 – I am confident in my skills.	1	5	+4	1	4	+3
4	7	9	+2	6	8	+2
3	5	0	-5	5	1	-4
2	2	0	-2	3	0	-3
1 – I am not confident in my	1	2	+1	1	3	+2

skills.						

After completing the project, students adjusted their scores to more accurately reflect their skills in video production. In some cases, students reported an increased confidence in their abilities, while a few students realized they had much opportunity for professional growth in this area.

Finally, the survey asked students to think about their professional work, and then report their perceived levels of adventure, risk, challenge and fear of the unknown. In three categories, average student responses increased from the pre-test to the post-test responses (Table 3). The only category to remain constant was the item, "I enjoy a challenge," where students reported an average score of 4.3 in both the pre-test and post-test.

Table 3: Advanced Advertising Strategy Students' Average Self-Reported Perceptions of Adventure, Risk and Fearing the Unknown in Their Professional Work

	Pre-Test Average Responses	Post-Test Average Responses
I am adventurous.	3.9	4.1
I like taking risks.	3.8	4.1
I fear the unknown.*	3.9	3.3

** Inverted 5-point Likert scale, where "5" meant 'I do not fear the unknown.'*

While each category recorded a positive change in student responses, the student responses again moved from the middle of the 5-point Likert scale to either end of the scale. A full report of pre-test and post-test student responses can be found in Tables 4, 5, 6 and 7.

Table 4: Advanced Advertising Strategy Students' Self-Reported Perceptions of Adventure in Their Professional Work.

	Pre-Test Responses	Post-Test Responses	Total Change
5 – I am adventurous.	4	6	+2
4	7	8	+1
3	4	1	-3
2	1	0	-1
1 – I am not adventurous.	0	1	+1

Table 5: Advanced Advertising Strategy Students' Self-Reported Perceptions of Risk in Their Professional Work.

	Pre-Test Responses	Post-Test Responses	Total Change
5 – I like taking risks.	3	5	+2
4	8	8	0
3	3	2	-1
2	2	1	-1
1 – I do not like taking risks.	0	0	0

Table 6: Advanced Advertising Strategy Students' Self-Reported Perceptions of Fearing the Unknown in Their Professional Work.

	Pre-Test Responses	Post-Test Responses	Total Change
5 – I do not fear the unknown.	3	6	+3
4	4	4	0
3	6	4	-2
2	1	2	+1
1 – I fear the unknown.	2	0	-2

Table 7: Advanced Advertising Strategy Students' Self-Reported Perceptions of Challenge in Their Professional Work.

	Pre-Test Responses	Post-Test Responses	Total Change
5 – I enjoy a challenge.	8	7	-1
4	6	7	+1
3	1	1	0
2	0	1	+1
1 – I do not enjoy a challenge.	1	0	-1

Discussion

Sixteen advanced advertising strategy students at a small, private Midwestern university were tasked with preparing an interactive, fully functioning iPad publication that promoted the

public relations major on campus. Intentionally, the faculty gave limited guidance in terms of a deliverable in the course. The assignment expanded students' awareness of communication methods and placed students as explorers—exploring new technology, navigating unknown applications and methods of content delivery. The students worked with an on-campus client to provide a sense of the professional world while maintaining an educational experience that could be easily managed among faculty colleagues. In one month, the students delivered an impressive "interactive brochure" that could be viewed on an iPad or similar tablet.

This study showed that projects like the boundary-free storytelling assignment can continue to enhance students' mastery of design programs introduced in earlier courses. Students are able to expand the use of these tools beyond elementary design skills and explore some of the more advanced options available in the programs. In addition, encouraging students to expand their skills in areas not previously used, like videography and video editing, help students build important skills while also identifying areas of potential growth. Identifying these needs prior to graduation may help students craft their future courses to strengthen their professional portfolios and skill sets, making them more attractive candidates as they enter the job market. Finally, the study showed that students embraced the adventurous, risk-taking culture created in this class and in the advertising curriculum. The students in this study reported that they enjoyed a challenge, making them perfectly suited for the fast-paced advertising and communications industry. By including challenging assignments like the boundary-free storytelling project, students can continue to nurture their adventurous spirit and take risks with projects in the "safety" of the classroom. Offering this playground for creative thought for students in all communication majors will ensure the professionals that graduate from the programs are

equipped to critically evaluate new technologies, provide innovative solutions for organizations and collaborate to strengthen communication content.

Recommendations for Infusing Boundary-Free Storytelling in Communications Curricula

In an ever-changing communications industry, undergraduate curriculum must adapt. Educators must challenge students to explore new technologies and constantly push students to think beyond the commonplace. While this article examined the effects of one specific project within an advertising curriculum, educators from various communication disciplines can easily implement one (or more) of the following recommendations to infuse creativity and innovation in their programs.

- **Survey the landscape.** Encourage students to use basic Internet searches to identify best practices in their industry of choice. What's out there? How can content messaging and/or delivery be improved to enhance user experience? What's missing? Should we expand to different markets? How might we reach various demographics in a more effective way?
- **Work with your neighbors.** Invite innovators in your community to speak to your class. Remind students that there is often progress in failure.
- **Put the students to the test.** Develop an assignment that offers little guidance. Instead, create a project that provides an overall objective that is part of a larger business goal. Encourage students to use their research and critical thinking skills to arrive at a creative solution that makes good business sense.
- **Appreciate fear and risk.** Students are often afraid of failure. They see value in risk, but often pull back if their ideas will hurt their grade. Infuse case studies within the curriculum that focus on key innovators in history. Assign opposing

> viewpoints in courses, and ask students to "defend" their assigned view—regardless of their personal opinions. Forcing students to think about challenges in different ways can create exciting work and a program-wide culture of embracing the unknown.

Mobile devices are giving students the ability to tell a story in many ways. Educators must continue to expose students to new technologies, encourage their assessment of those tools and guide them in their development of content. Enhancing curriculum to help students embrace challenges and tackle the unknown—the only constant in the ever-changing communications industry—is a necessary component in the education of 21st Century students. Boundary-free storytelling provides a platform for exciting, limitless exploration of mobile devices, content delivery and message development. Incorporating boundary-free ideas into curricula can enhance the faculty and student experience. Faculty skills will remain current and fresh, while both faculty and students navigate challenges together, creating a win-win situation for the program and the industry. As one student in this study said, "Even though, at times, I was very frustrated …I think at least I walk away with the thought that life is full of troubleshooting and things we can't always understand or control…" Tackling the unknown, one project at a time…

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Biography

Dana Coester, Assistant Professor, PI Reed School of Journalism, West Virginia University.

Coester's work focuses on community media and technology disruption. Her research examines the future of storytelling with special interests in mobile behavior and experiments in new narrative forms in digital, mobile and augmented reality. Her award-winning experiments in interactive media span art installation, web and film. Coester earned her master's degree in Journalism from the University of Missouri-Columbia in 1993.

Joel Beeson, Associate Professor, PI Reed School of Journalism, West Virginia University.

Beeson's work focuses on community media, digital divide and representations of race and class in documentary narratives. His research explores the cultural history of documentary production as social practice, and has pioneered uses of ethnographic and oral history methodologies to guide community-generated content. Beeson earned his master's degree in Journalism from the University of Missouri-Columbia in 1993, and his doctorate in American Studies from The Union Institute & University in 2012.

Biography

Kelly Bruhn, Ph.D., APR, Assistant Professor, Drake University, teaches undergraduate courses in public relations campaigns and research and graduate seminars in the Master of Communication Leadership (MCL) program at Drake University. Prior to joining the Drake faculty, she created award-winning campaigns for Verizon Wireless and various nonprofit organizations in public relations agencies in Chicago and Indianapolis. Bruhn earned her doctorate from Michigan State University. She is accredited by the Public Relations Society of

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Sandy Henry, Associate Professor, Drake University, amassed more than 20 years of experience in advertising and marketing, in both agencies and in-house environments. Her clients have included a major grocery store chain, a nonprofit arts organization, and one of the world's largest agricultural seed companies. Henry has won many awards for her work, including Addys, Tellys, NAMAs and CASE Awards.

Henry received her B.A. in Journalism and Mass Communication from Drake, and a Master of Science in Mass Communication from Miami University. Henry is an Apple Certified Trainer (Final Cut Pro) and is active with the Broadcast Education Association, the Des Moines chapter of the American Advertising Federation, and the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication. sandy.henry@drake.edu, http://sjmc.drake.edu/about/faculty-and-staff/sandy-henry/

Appendix I

Thank you for taking time to answer the following questions about your technology use and content creation. Your feedback will be used to better understand the feelings and habits of you and your classmates as a whole. Please complete the survey (both front and back) fully. Thank you for your cooperation!

Technology Use

1. Do you own one of the following:

Tablet	Yes	No
Smart Phone	Yes	No
Laptop	Yes	No

2. If you own a Tablet, what brand do you own?

_____ Kindle

_____ Nook

_____ iPad

_____ Nexus

_____ Other (Please specify_____)

3. Have you ever used a Tablet? Yes No

4. If you answered "Yes" to #4, for what purpose did you use the Tablet? (Please select all that apply.)

_____ Educational

_____ Recreational/Personal

_____ Business/Professional (ie. Internship, etc.)

_____ Other (Please specify_____)

5. For what function did/do you use your Tablet? (Please select all that apply.)

_____ Search the Internet

_____ Read Publications

_____ Take Photographs

_____ Take Video

_____ Video Chat or Chat With Friends

_____ Create or Modify Office or Google Documents

_____ Play Games

_____ Watch Video

_____ View Photographs

_____ Send Email

_____ Participate in Social Media

_____ Other (Please specify_____)

6. Thinking of the total time you spend on your Tablet as 100%, how often – in percentages – would you say that you use the functions below? (Note: Your scores below should total 100.)

_____ Search the Internet

_____ Read Publications

_____ Take Photographs

_____ Take Video

_____ Video Chat or Chat With Friends

_____ Create or Modify Office or Google Documents

_____ Play Games

_____ Watch Video

_____ View Photographs

_____ Send Email

_____ Participate in Social Media

_____ Other (Please specify_____)

7. Do you use your Tablet's e-reader application? Yes No

8. If so, how often?

All the Time _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ Never

9. Do you subscribe to/purchase any of the following e-publications? (Please select all that apply.)

_____ E-Book

_____ Digital Magazine

_____ E-Newsletter

_____ Blog

_____ Other (Please specify _____)

Creating Content

10. Have you ever created:

An App?	Yes	No
RSS (Really Simple Syndication)?	Yes	No
An HTML Program On Your Own?	Yes	No

11. Please select any of the programs below that you've used. (Mark all that apply.)

_____ iMovie

_____ InDesign

_____ Illustrator

_____ Photoshop

_____ Acrobat (downloadable PDF)

12. Using the scale, please rate your ability to use each tool:

	Extremely Capable						Not At All Capable
iMovie	____	____	____	____	____	____	____
InDesign	____	____	____	____	____	____	____
Illustrator	____	____	____	____	____	____	____
Photoshop	____	____	____	____	____	____	____
Acrobat	____	____	____	____	____	____	____

13. Using the following scale, please rate your agreement with the following statements:

	Agree				Disagree
I am confident in my videography skills.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
I am confident in my video editing skills.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____

14. Using the scales below, rate the following when thinking about your professional work:

I am adventurous. _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ I am not adventurous.

I like taking risks. _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ I do not like taking risks.

I fear the unknown. _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ I do not fear the unknown.

I enjoy a challenge. _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ I do not enjoy a challenge.

15. What is your major(s)

_____