

# What Teaching Has Taught Me

THE FUTURE OF MEDIA IS BETTER THAN YOU THINK

© [Vibu design gallery] / Adobe Stock

*By Mark Mayfield, Journalism Instructor  
Department of Journalism & Creative Media  
The University of Alabama*

I have often told students to consider journalism as a great adventure. It can take them to places they might otherwise never visit and introduce them to remarkable people and cultures beyond their own experience. This was certainly true of my career as a reporter and editor and has since served as a backdrop to most everything I've taught in my classrooms at The University of Alabama.

Journalism gave me the opportunity to meet a diversity of people in nearly every American state and several other nations. Some of these folks were famous, a few maybe infamous, but the great majority were ordinary people doing good—and sometimes extraordinary—work.

I still consider myself a journalist long after I left the profession. Maybe I cling to this because I remain convinced that journalism is a most worthy endeavor and essential in a democracy. It's an understatement to say it's needed now more than ever.

Yet nothing in my earlier career has been as rewarding as teaching. Much of this is connected to the eye-opening discovery that in an era of social media clickbait, a lot of it wildly inaccurate, there are plenty of aspiring young journalists dedicated to getting it right. They are mastering the skills needed to be successful across a wide range of digital media platforms that didn't exist in earlier decades.

For more perspective, I asked Tom Arenberg, one of my faculty colleagues and a veteran former *Birmingham News* sports and metro editor, if there is anything he understands now about college students that he didn't know before making the transition from the industry to teaching.

"I'd heard the stereotype That they're all there for football and parties," he said. "I didn't know if that was true or not. But I know now that that's baloney. The vast majority of my students are busting their fannies to learn stuff and do good work. They're very smart. They're hard-working and I figured out that they are thinking about how they can contribute to their communities after they graduate."

This all reminds me of an essay I wrote sixteen years ago, called "Leaving New York." It was a memoir about my work in Manhattan's magazine world, and an ode of sorts to the things I would likely miss as I made the transition to higher education.

You won't find this work online or in print. I never published it. Looking back, that was a good decision. It would be a far different memoir now. I could not have known then that teaching journalism, after decades of practicing it, would be my most important and enjoyable work.

At some point, the success of my students became more important than anything I accomplished. However, as Arenberg reminded me, the sense of personal accomplishment is still there, just in another way.

"If you nail down a great story in journalism, thousands of people are gonna see it and read it," he said. "That's not the case with higher education. It doesn't need to be the case with higher education. It's a smaller scale sense of satisfaction when I can legitimately give an A to a hard-working student. That's great."

Or, he added, "when a student might get a class assignment published in local media. That's a little smaller scale, but great self-satisfaction there, as well."

Overall, my role on faculty has been to teach writing in several forms, from news to sports to food. I have also regularly taught media ethics, a course which, at its core, is aimed at giving students a chance to learn and apply theories, codes, and guidelines to specific issues and help them make ethical decisions as they enter the media landscape.

Through these years I have tried to see myself in the seats that students occupy in my classrooms. I remember the grind, the uncertainty, the balance between fitting in and being left out, and the usually unspoken but real desire to have someone treat you like a human being instead of just another student in a school filled with 41,000 of them.

This is a subject that has often come up during talks that *Sixth Avenue Journal* Editor-in-Chief Dr. Henry John Latta and I have had over the years. Both of us agree there are few moments in life better than the privilege of walking in a classroom and teaching students.

That's not to say, of course, that every student will dedicate themselves to learning. To be sure, many will excel while others, some of whom are equally talented, won't fare as well due to any number of reasons, including a lack of study and missing class and assignment deadlines.

As another of my colleagues once told me, "You can't save all of them." Yet a good class can make a difference, even with less talented or less dedicated students.

"I'm not looking for mastery from every student," Arenberg said. "But if a student comes away with any basic skills...they write a little bit better...they think critically a little better. I'm fine with that, even if maybe the work wasn't what I hoped it would be by the end of the semester."

Nevertheless, it's not a stretch to say that the future of journalism and perhaps our democracy likely depends on how the best of these media students conduct themselves in the years ahead.

I'm confident they will be up to the challenge. ●