Why Journalism Might Actually Be the Class of the Future

by John Spencer
Posted on May 7, 2018

When we imagine the future of learning, we often hear about STEM and STEAM and things like robotics or coding. But I'd argue that one of the most relevant subjects for developing a maker mindset is actually journalism. Here's why.

The Most Underrated Subject in Schools?

If you looked at my teaching contracts, it would appear that I taught journalism for three of my twelve teaching years. But that's not entirely accurate. While I also taught self-contained and social studies, I always taught journalism.

It started in my first year of teaching when we were assigned intervention periods. Nobody else on my team wanted to teach writing intervention . . . which felt like a mistake, because writing is one of my favorite subjects to teach.

Still, I quickly realized that my students HATED writing. So, I began with the question, "How do you feel about writing?" They described the boredom, the anger, and the frustration of writing. They hated writing prompts and wanted the freedom to choose their own topics. They hated the formulaic nature of the editing process. They hated the fact that they were writing to no one but the teacher.

I realized that they didn't hate writing. They hated fake writing. They hated writing in school.

So, I pitched an idea. "We are going to run an online magazine. We can do videos and podcasts. We can write articles. You get to choose the topics."

At first, they still hated it. They grumbled. They whined. They told me that it wasn't fun. However, something changed two weeks later when they saw their work online. Over the next few weeks, the class culture changed as they began to take more ownership in the learning.

For the rest of the year, this writing intervention class morphed into a journalism class. They called our blog Social Voice.

This quickly spilled over into my regular social studies class, where students began filming documentaries and recording podcasts. The next year, we began using a PBL approach and added elements of design thinking as a way to start with empathy and eventually design media packages that we would launch to a specific audience.

What Do Students Actually Need?

When people talk about the future of learning, they often mention technology and engineering. Things like Sphero balls and Arduino sets and coding projects. While I love the emphasis on STEM and STEAM, I can't help but wonder if maybe we miss out on the power of journalism because it isn't shiny and new.

However, if you ask people what type of technology skills students will need in the future, you'll hear things like digital citizenship, media literacy, and creative thinking. Unfortunately, schools tend to teach these topics in isolation, as if they exist in separate little buckets.
But journalism takes the buckets and mixes them all together. Here, these ideas overlap constantly (see JPG).

Journalism integrates digital citizenship, media literacy, and creativity in a connective and authentic way. Instead of teaching mini-lessons on these topics, students discover these ideas as they engage in inquiry, research, content creation, and publishing. Here's what I mean:

Digital Citizenship (Or as I like to call it "citizenship")

Schools often approach digital citizenship with a fear-based deficit mindset. There's an implied message of, "you better not screw this thing up, kids." So, you get lessons on the dangers of digital footprints, the importance of being nice, and the need to follow the rules.

But is that really citizenship? Don't we want our students to grow into critical thinking citizens who change the world? Don't we want them to learn what it means to engage in hard conversations while still being kind and empathetic? Don't we want them to advocate for things that they care about?

Those ideas are at the forefront of digital journalism. It's the belief that students should engage with the world in meaningful ways. Sometimes it means sharing their passions and interests with the world. Other times, it's means advocating for issues that they care about. But the common idea is the notion of a citizen journalist who thinks critically about their world. Here, students learn to leverage the creative and connective power of their technology.

Media Literacy and Information Literacy

With digital tools, it is easier than ever to create, edit, and publish your work to the world. But there's a cost. It's also easier than ever to spread misinformation. And fake news has become a real issue in recent times. We see this with students. According to a Stanford study, only 25% of high school students were able to identify an accurate news story when also given a fake one. Students also had a hard time distinguishing between real and fake photographs as well as authentic and staged videos.

Researchers used the words "bleak" and "dismaying" to describe it. But it's not going away anytime soon and that's a very real problem.

Digital journalism takes media literacy a step further.
Students learn how to read critically but they also learn how to identify credible sources as they create their own content. Instead of stopping at critical reading, students learn how to construct critically. They internalize the mindset of critical reading as they create content that is trustworthy.

If you think about football, it's a complex game with all kinds of offensive and defensive schemes. You can study it at a deep level as a fan but you understand the mindset and the inner workings of the game when you play it yourself. Similarly, you can appreciate art at a deep level as a scholar but there's something powerful about this understanding when you sit before a canvas on your own. The same is true of students. When they engage in the creative act of journalism, they gain a better understanding of how people produce media and construct informational texts.

The Maker Mindset
I am passionate about seeing students develop a maker mindset, but often when we hear the term "maker," we think of engineering. Makerspaces full of robots. People solving complex problems in collaborative groups. Students prototyping with 3D printers.

But there's another side of the maker mindset that is rooted in context. It's what happens when students engage in inquiry and problem-solving by looking at things from multiple perspectives. It's what happens when students become master curators. It's what happens when students think critically about information from multiple sources and then take things a step further by thinking critically about the medium itself. It's what happens when they learn what it means to send their work to an authentic audience.

These creative elements are central to journalism, as students move from inquiry through research, into iterative thinking, and eventually into the creation and launch of multimedia content. When students own the entire publishing process, they think creatively and develop a maker mindset. They find their creative voice.

They become makers.

The Rise of the Curators
When we think of creativity, it's easy to picture a person coming up with something entirely new, pulling it from thin air and making it from scratch. But if you watch people engaged in creative work, they are often critical consumers of the same type of work they create. There's this ongoing cycle of critical consuming, inspiration, and creative work. As they create more, it leads to a deeper ability to consume critically, where they find more inspiration, and the cycle continues.

So, if we want students to be makers, we need students to be critical consumers.

Unfortunately. we live in a world of instant information, where ideas go viral without much thought regarding accuracy and validity. It's a place where content is cheap. Cheap to make. Cheap to share. Cheap to consume. The traditional gatekeepers are gone, which is great for students. They can create and share their work in ways that were previously unimaginable.

But there's a cost. The best stuff doesn't always rise to the top and, if we're not careful, we mistake the speed of consumption for the depth of knowledge. This is why we need students to learn the art of curation.

This is one of the strengths of journalism. When students learn how to think like journalists, they learn how to gather, organize, and prioritize information. In the process, they become curators.

But Isn't Journalism a Dying Industry?
Whenever I mention the value of journalism, people are quick to point out that traditional journalism is a dying industry. Why prepare students for a job that will no longer exist? They have a point. It can sound crazy to open an elementary or middle school journalism program when local newspapers are going out of business.

I'd argue that the industry isn't dying so much as evolving. Look at the sheer number of professional bloggers, podcasters, and YouTubers. It's a massive industry. True, many of them aren't journalists in the traditional sense. Some of them spread misinformation. But doesn't that actually speak to the necessity of learning how to think like a journalist? Whether you are a foodie blogger or doing a political podcast, there is value in learning how to investigate, research, think critically, and communicate clearly.

But I wonder if the "Isn't the industry dying?" question misses the point. After all, we still teach P.E. despite the fact that most kids will not become professional athletes. We still teach music even when cities are cutting their symphony and opera programs. We teach math, even though few students will grow up to be professional mathematicians. We have chess clubs and competitions despite the fact that none of the students will grow up to become kings or queens ordering medieval knights to attack unsuspecting villages.

We do these things because they help students learn how to think differently.

I believe the best way to prepare students for the future is to empower them in the present. Journalism asks students to make sense out of their world as critical thinking citizens and then communicate their ideas to an authentic audience. Isn't that what we want for kids?