A virtual textbook based on a scoring rubric as an instructional tool in teaching and training news writing

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Working as a journalist in the independent English-language Russia-based The Moscow Times newspaper as a news and investigative reporter (as Yevgenia Borisova), Yevgenia at the same time conducted nine long-term distance learning programmes training journalists in CIS countries in modern news writing. Now she is working on the scientific underpinning of such programmes at the University of Canterbury. The virtual textbook, which is presented in her paper, is one of the important tools of distance training programmes.

Abstract

Reviewing and marking stories in journalism teaching is a time-consuming process. Tutors often long for a comprehensive set of pre-typed comments which could be attached to copy so that they do not have to repeat the same comments over and over again. A web-based virtual textbook, which is the subject of this paper, is a possible solution. It is comprised of a number of sets of short pre-typed learning materials, examples, model stories, typical mistakes and quizzes, which can be attached to news stories by hyperlinks on a special website. The materials are easy to update. All the learning materials are linked to a scoring rubric, which at the same time can be used to assess the quality of news stories. The virtual textbook can be used in a classroom setting, distance learning or blended learning (a combination of the two).

Introduction

Teaching journalism is a challenge. The big and small elements of journalism, which need to be understood and digested in order to be used for writing stories are in the thousands. The job becomes even more of a challenge when journalists need to be retrained from old habits, rooted in oppressive regimes, as is the case in many developing countries. Journalism training is booming in such countries and many western trainers are helping to bring the standards of reporting up to scratch while “the need for basic reporting skills is still central” (“Emerging journalism”, 2007, p. 71).

De Burgh (2005) argues that there is nothing wrong with journalism having different standards in different countries and that even between western countries standards
differ. However, if developing countries are willing to shift from dictatorships to democracy and pave the way for civil society to develop in their nations, the standards of reporting need to be upgraded. As Kovach and Rosenstiel (2001) show, the fundamentals of journalism are closely aligned to democratic principles.

But changing deeply ingrained, faulty habits is harder to do than to teach journalism to novice students in western countries with rich journalism cultures and in a society open to questioning the authorities. Journalists in post-communist countries carry a wealth of habits and traditions which are partially inherited from the previous authoritarian regimes in their country. These habits are anchored in the administrations and in the media in the contemporary political regimes, many of which only pretend to be democratic. This is the case in most of the post-USSR countries.

In the experience of this researcher, who has been training journalists in post-USSR countries since 1998, the biggest problems with news writing standards among these journalists include the following:

- lack of accuracy
- lack or absence of context
- one-sided reporting, lack of fairness or balance
- lack of substantiation (who, what, when, where and how much) and explanations (why, how, what does it mean, what happens next) to the news.
- advertisement, corporate announcements and propaganda posing as editorial material
- absence of scepticism about what officials say
- official-style writing
- lack of focus or structure

Changing such practices takes time, but there is little hope without training. There is much at stake in addressing these problems, putting journalism trainers in a position of responsibility (Munro, 2006).

The previous experience of this researcher who conducted 10 long-term distance learning news writing programmes in six post-communist countries, shows that blended learning, or a combination of distance learning with the kick-off editorial training, is a highly suitable setting that helps change the mindset of journalists and facilitate the shift to modern standards of journalism news writing.

Asynchronous e-learning as available ‘anytime anywhere’ has certain advantages over training in the workplace. This holds not only for short seminars, but for any classroom setting. Among the biggest advantage is that the trainees need neither take time off work nor move to another location to receive learning experience. Just the opposite, learning at the workplace helps to immediately incorporate the new knowledge and skills into their work. (Moore & Kearsley, 2005; Rugelj, 2001). The asynchronous mode of such learning means that journalists may make the time for training when it is convenient for them. Feedback on their stories, written as regular work assignments, provides the individual basis for such learning. Such training is also cost-effective as it needs neither the physical presence of the trainer next to the trainees nor that they even be in the same country.
All these reasons give distance learning programmes the potential to not only introduce the modern standards of reporting, as workshops can do, but reinforce them through various teaching instruments until they are understood, digested, translated into new skills and the old reporting habits unlearned.

This paper presents a virtual textbook as one teaching tool in such training. It has two roles. Firstly, the collection of feedback in it provides scaffolding support for journalists. Secondly, because the process of unlearning old writing and reporting habits is slow and learners will repeat the same mistakes writing stories as their daily assignments, the virtual textbook saves the trainer time. Instead of repeating the same comments when marking stories, the trainer can use the text, explanations and examples that the textbook provides, along with specific comments.

The textbook’s pre-typed learning materials elaborate on various elements of news writing of different quality. These texts are attached to the related descriptors in a scoring rubric, the NTA (news texts assessment) system which breaks down news writing into its constituent elements (Munro, 2007). Such instructional design enables the learning and the assessment tools to be used at the same time as a comprehensive feedback for learners. Hyperlinks between the learning materials extend the learning experience of those journalists, encouraging learning. The scoring rubric may be used not only to assess the quality of news stories written by journalists during the training, but also to monitor their progress throughout the training. The instructional design allows each of the learning materials to be quickly detected and easily attached to the relevant places in the copy.

This researcher has created such a virtual textbook as part of a larger experimental action research into the creation of corrective feedback during online distance training of journalists in developing countries.

Literature review

The learning tool is underpinned by educational theories of formative feedback in professional and industrial settings and the cognitive apprenticeship theory which features scaffolding as providing assistance to learners on an as-needed basis and fading it as the competence increases (Azevedo & Hardwin, 2005; Pea, 2004; Puntambekar & Hubscher, 2005; Sherin, Reiser, & Edelson, 2004; Sims, 2002) as one of its critical components along with modeling the designed behavior and coaching the learners (A. Collins, Brown, & Holum, 1991; A Collins, Brown, & Newman, 1989). Formative feedback, or comments and assessments by a supervisor given on assignments supplied as part of learning, aims to close the knowledge gaps of the learners (Black & William, 1998) and is considered by many authors to have high educational value (Black & William, 1998; Sadler, 1998; Yorke, 2003). Markers are expected to outline strengths and weaknesses in the work of the learners and steer them towards better achievements (Linn & Miller, 2005; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2004; Nitko, 2004). Providing feedback on the working assignments during distance training for journalists in developing countries in its core is the same job that is done by any university marker.

But the job of giving comprehensive feedback is “time intensive” (Plimmer & Mason, 2006, p. 3), especially when the markers have to repeat the same comments, because
students make similar mistakes and the same students repeat the same mistakes over and over again (N. J. Cooper, 2000). A number of researchers recommend the use of tre-typed comments. These are both more efficient with trainers' time (N. J. Cooper, 2000), including in e-learning setting (Denton, 2003; Heinrich, 2007; Heinrich & Lawn, 2004; McLachlan-Smith & Irons, 1998; Zhang & Heinrich, 2005) and make feedback more consistent by helping to avoid the use of odd, ambiguous and laborious comments (N. J. Cooper, 2000, p. 281).

But in practice there is a tension between the amount of typical reusable instructions which may be efficiently provided by tutors to the learners, and the ability to quickly locate them in the repository where they are stored (Heinrich, 2007). Two main types of instructional designs have been proposed in literature that would enable the quick and easy location of the needed instructional content for e-learning. Most are built as a tree, with a parent directory which is further split into sub-categories, and the sub-cATEGORIES into further smaller elements (Chrysostomou & Papadopoulos, 2005; Rugelj, 2001; “The learning object metadata standard”, 2002). Another option is grouping learning instruction around a scoring rubric (Heinrich & Lawn, 2004).

Approved by the international standards setting body New York-based Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers Standards Association (IEEE) instructional design known as the Learning Object Metadata Standard allows the reuse of various learning objects, which are understood quite loosely as “any entity, digital or non-digital, which can be used, reused or referenced during technology supported learning” (“The learning object metadata standard”, 2002). To enable the reuse of the large amounts of learning objects, a search system must be created which will enable users to find each of them quickly, “as opposed to browsing the entire digital library one object at a time until they find a satisfactory one” (Wiley, 2002, p. 11). The way learning objects are assembled for reuse and their granularity are the “two largest issues in the learning objects area in instructional design terms” (Wiley, 2002, p. 9).

Classification of learning objects

To resolve the first issue – the classification - the IEEE’s Learning Objects Metadata Standard is composed as a hierarchy of elements with nine parent categories, each of which contain sub-elements. The sub-elements are either independent elements that hold data, or themselves contain further sub-elements. All the elements have codes. The parent category is coded from 1 to 9, the first level of sub-elements – from 1.1 to 9.9 and each of the further breakdown of the elements is coded by using the extension of the same logic. This structure facilitates the discovery, location, evaluation and acquisition of learning resources and allows tailoring of the resource descriptions to suit the specialised needs of a learning community (Barker, 2005).

One similar instructional design was used for workplace e-learning of employees of a high-tech company in Slovenia by Rugelj (2002). The author called it ‘virtual textbook’ and the instructional design was called a ‘knowledge tree’. The textbook contained a “collection of specific learning materials, prepared for particular subject of study or particular course” with the addition of the links to different external information resources (Rugelj, 2000, p. 1). The learning materials could have been located by a list of pointers to the relevant documents, built for each particular subject of instruction. The ‘knowledge tree’, Rugelj wrote, helped to subdivide each topic covered in the textbook into smaller more specialised units, which graphically
resembled a tree structure. Other authors of virtual textbooks believe that they must not be the primary learning content, but an additional resource which makes use of the Internet resources and moves learners beyond content mastery towards more complex skills including information-seeking, problem solving, grasping multiple and diverse perspectives (Ince, 2004; Liaw, 2000).

One instructional design in which online learning instruction – frequently used markers’ comments – are linked to the scoring rubric is mentioned by Heinrich (2007). Frequently used comments are attached directly to the rubric and feedback to the students can be related to the categories within the rubric. This makes the task of the marker more efficient and provides the student with more information (Heinrich, 2007, p. 271). The MarkTool, designed at Massey University (Heinrich & Lawn, 2004) also allows the marker to suppress some of the comments in order not to overwhelm the learner with the amount of feedback information making him or her focus on the specific aspects only.

Granularity of the learning materials – the second largest issue

Wiley (2002) regards the granularity of the materials which end up as the learning content as the second largest issue in the instructional design of learning programmes. While learning objects may include anything from multimedia and instructional content to software tools and even people and events referenced during technology supported learning (“The learning object metadata standard”, 2002), several authors suggest a more stringent definition of the learning object as small, reusable chunks of instructional media (Friesen, 2004; Reigeluth & Nelson, 1997; South & Monson, 2000; Wiley, 2002). Decomposing big texts into smaller and almost independent subtasks within the appropriate context is believed to facilitate human cognition (Anderson, Reder, & Simon, 1996) and increase the speed and efficiency of development of instructional designs (Reigeluth & Nelson, 1997).

Rugelj (2001) also pointed out in relation to his virtual textbook that learning materials for it were not “just simply copied into selected format”, but broken down into smaller tasks, which the trainees found easy to understand and digest (Rugelj, 2001, p. 2). A recent emerging concept in workplace learning is nano-learning, a content, broken up in small chunks of usable information which could keep a separate learning unit as short as from 5 to 30 minutes, address a specific point and be compact enough to be email-attachable or easily downloaded as a video podcast (K. Cooper, 2006).

The concepts of such “nano-learning” (Masie, 2005, p. 1) as a small learning experience of a few minutes only, “microchunk learning” (Lindner, 2006, p. 42) or “microlearning” (ibid, 46) as an e-learner’s short interaction with a learning matter broken down to very small bits of content, are “micromedia” as a digital atomised media that can be consumed in “unbundled microchunks” and “aggregated and reconstructed in hyper-efficient ways” (Hague, 2005, p. 33); “microcontent” as “information published in short form, with its length dictated by the constraint of a single main topic” (Dash, 2002).

Microcontent should become a base for the complex and dynamic ecosystem which was created by the new paradigm of the learning, which is largely
affected by the Web environment (Lindner, 2006) and become “very small pieces, loosely joined, permanently rearranging to form volatile (micro)-knowledge clouds, and making necessary new forms of (micro-)learning” (Lindner, 2006, p. 41).

The need to give the learners exactly what they need in small bits is especially significant in the era of “‘digital natives’, the first generation to grow up with digital media in multiple forms; they are extremely adept at multitasking with multiple devices” (Barbaux, 2006, p. 133). Barbaux, an advocate of m-learning (mobile learning), adds, that meaningful learning “will not occur unless it is anchored in an authentic task where the learner can experiment, make mistakes and learn” (ibid, p. 137) and that learning can even occur in “bite-sized” learning “chunks” (ibid, p. 138) which are suitable for three reasons – they can accommodate the small screen of the mobile phone, its processing capability and the available students’ short learning times and cycles.

Journalism professional e-training

The main entity providing professional training in journalism, the Florida-based NewsU university founded by the Poynter Institute, the largest journalism training organisation in the United States, in its few years attracted over 51,000 journalists from 175 countries to take a short interactive course posted on its website (some only about one hour long). The NewsU also conducted two four-week distance learning courses which included video, podcasts, interactive exercises and a course blog for the participants to communicate. On some occasions journalists came together in a virtual classroom setting and conducted three 30-minute phone conversations with the tutor (Scanlan, 2007).

Some e-training programmes are run by media producers. The biggest of this kind is BBC. At its site www.bbctraining.com the broadcasting corporation offers a few courses for self-paced learning, which are either text-based or include video podcasts. There are also some private initiatives in offering e-training. One former reporter from the New York Times, who is also coaching reporters at the Washington Post, is offering an online course, in which the critique and editing of seven stories, a memo evaluating them, handouts and one hour of discussion over the phone paid-for by the reporter would cost SUS100 (Wicklein, 2007).

However, there is no available literature on the Web-based long-term distance training courses offered not only to individual reporters in developing countries, but to professional media organisations in order to upgrade the standards of reporting to the modern benchmarks.

Hypothesis

Despite the obvious modern trend to shift learning online, there is little journalism e-training in developing countries. The instructional design is also lacking for long-term courses which could address the core editorial problems in busy editorial offices of media outlets in developing countries.
It was hypothesised that such e-training could be assisted by a virtual textbook based on small pieces of learning materials, which are linked to the scoring rubric to enable them to be easily tracked. The descriptors in the rubric can be codified and sets of learning materials attached to these codes. The learning materials can then be hyperlinked to the relevant errors in stories written by journalists. The journalists can view them at the same time as they read the marked story, thus deepening their understanding of the underlying problem.

Methodology

A weighted criterion-based scoring rubric with 13 criteria was prepared at an earlier stages of this research and presented at the World Journalism Education Conference in Singapore (Munro, 2007) to be used to monitor the progress of journalists in news writing. The 13 criteria were: newsworthiness; accuracy and credibility; fairness and context; factual sufficiency; explanations; impact and consequences; practical use; journalist’s independence; details and colour; use of quotes; use of language; intro; and structure.

The content in the criteria are classified in five gradations - from ‘unacceptable’ to ‘outstanding’. Each cell in the rubric contains from two to seven descriptors, outlining the specific performances within the gradation of a criteria and is provided with its own weighting. The weightings have been developed and fine-tuned through interviewing 23 highly qualified journalism experts.

Each descriptor is given a three-digit code. The first digit in the code represents the number of the criterion, the second the quality level and the third the number of the descriptor within the level. For example, the descriptor (411) represents the fourth criterion in the rubric, ‘factual sufficiency’, the No 1 level (‘unacceptable’) and the No 1 descriptor “Key facts or figures which could change the perception of the story are missing without explanation.” That is, the text was factually unacceptable because key facts were missing. The descriptors have been chosen as the most representative of the performance of the specific quality which are the most common among journalists in developing countries. The last descriptor in each cell represents all the other possible performances in the same gradation, which are impossible to include in the scoring rubric, because too many descriptors would make it unwieldy and impossible to use. Because of its substantial length, the rubric cannot be fully included in this article. Table 1 represents the descriptors in one of its 65 cells.

| Key facts or figures which could change the perception of the story are missing without explanation (411); or information is missing which must substantiate the lead in a story based on comment (412); or local angle is missing where needed (413); or story has other serious flaws regarding its factual sufficiency (414) |

The highest mark for the article which scores all ‘outstanding’ marks in all 13 criteria is 100 points, while ‘good’, or standard performance in all the criteria is 67 points. Performance graded as ‘unacceptable’ is penalised while ‘inappropriate’ gradations result in zero points (Munro, 2007), making negative scores possible. For the training, the scoring was harsher in the ‘accuracy and credibility’ and the ‘fairness and context’ categories, because of their importance in good journalism. The ‘unacceptable’
performance in these categories (for example, plagiarism, very serious mistakes, libel, advertisement or promotion posed as news, propaganda) was fined minus 67 points while the ‘inappropriate’ performance was fined minus 33 points. Assigning greater weight to mistakes has been recommended in pedagogical literature as an instrument to demonstrate to the learner the importance of accuracy and the other items that an instructor wants to emphasise (Heinrich & Lawn, 2004; Patel, Kinshuk, & Russell, 2002)

The creation of the virtual textbook

The virtual textbook has been created as a compromise between conciseness and generalisation which are required for an assessment format, and the comprehensiveness and in-depth details needed for instruction. Most of the descriptors with the three-digit codes are formulated rather generally so that they will cover the range of matters which arise in news writing. For instructional purposes each descriptor has been broken up and detailed in learning material linked to the specific performances.

The length of most of the learning materials in the virtual textbook is restricted to a range of from a few sentences to one page. The codes in the scoring rubric serve as generic codes and the text attached to them serves as the core content of the descriptor that briefly describes the general level of performance typical for a specific description. This page also gives links to the variety of learning materials which elaborate on more specific performances within the same descriptor, and also links to the ‘good’ and ‘outstanding’ descriptors of the same performance within the same criteria. Most pages of the instructional materials have further links to other relevant learning materials within the virtual textbook and some have links to external online learning resources.

To become microcontent, the materials in the virtual textbook are broken down and coded beyond the first three digits so that the text does not exceed one page and in most cases is even smaller. The codes in the virtual book extend to combinations of 7 digits and letters of the Latin alphabet.

For example, the parent category of the scoring rubric 111 becomes:
1111 – Jargon is used
1111a1 Official jargon (officialese) is used
1111a2 The list of official expressions, banned to be used in news
1111a2a Don’t use the word ‘given’ when you mean ‘this’
1111b1 Technical jargon is used

These seven levels of coding provide an opportunity to create an extensive framework of learning materials. Placement of these learning materials online allows the tutor to quickly update them when necessary, supplying fresh examples and explanations, including from the process of training.

Most of the learning materials are presented in a way that if the journalists have time they can read not only the main core material on the page, but also the materials hyperlinked to the text on the page which elaborates on difficult or controversial issues mentioned in the core text. Most pages also have sets of related learning
materials listed as suggested reading within the virtual textbook or outside resources at the bottom of the page.

The materials are written in a way that provides simple explanations and instruction at the ‘unacceptable’ and ‘inappropriate’ levels while at the ‘acceptable’ level it suggests reflecting before turning to the links with the learning materials and examples describing ‘good’ and ‘excellent’ performance. Different content of the learning materials is meant to provide the necessary levels of scaffolding support which would fade meaning the codes of the mistakes would be replaced with more praise for the achievements as the skills progress and the previous faulty habits are unlearned. The hyperlinks between the learning materials have an additional goal which is important for the trainer – to relieve the trainer from the need to insert all relevant materials which students need to be aware of to fully understand the issue. With the hyperlinks in the materials, the tutor needs only to mark the code of the ‘hub’ descriptor and the other materials would come up among the learning materials automatically.

Over 500 pages of learning materials were then prepared for the training. The bulk of the learning material aims to teach the ‘good’ level of performance. This level contains most of the learning texts, examples and pieces of advice. The core learning material is based on a condensed version of the understanding of particular items widely accepted in western journalism.

The ‘outstanding’ level typically contains examples of creative or otherwise outstanding performance represented in various journalistic news texts. The explanations of the ‘acceptable’, ‘unacceptable’ and ‘inappropriate’ levels of performance were mostly based on a short explanation why such performance is considered low quality, example of such performance, and the links to the ‘good’ and ‘outstanding’ levels of relevant performances.

Organisation of e-training

The learning materials were coded and posted on the website, specially created for online training by a professional webmaster. Testing of the virtual textbook in the form of action research started in September 2007 and is planned to be completed in January 2008. The format of the training is blended training, which is a combination of face-to-face learning and distance learning. The participants are 16 journalists including 10 staff reporters, two foreign correspondents, three writing desk editors (news, business and foreign) and editor-in-chief of an agency in a post-USSR country in transition from a communist regime to a market economy. The main problems of the agency is that it is run by a CEO who has little trust in the editor and himself conducts editorial meetings despite not being a journalist. Yet another problem was absence of a style book and lack of understanding of modern news style by editors and the CEO. The main target of the training was defined by the CEO as attaining close to ‘international standards of news writing’. The standards commonly used by Reuters, Associated Press and Bloomberg were suggested as the new standards and the translations of the stories written by these agencies were used as examples.

Two weeks of face-to-face ‘kick-off’ editorial training was conducted with most of them in August 2007 in the working setting, which included 10 hour-long seminars in
which all the core elements of the virtual textbook were discussed, and personal consultations during the working day. Then, the training proceeded online.

The e-training includes several components for the journalists, while the main was reading reviewed and assessed news stories after posting them at the training website. Journalists have an option to read only the trainer’s comments, to read the comments and to see the descriptions of the mistakes by pointing a cursor on the code, and to read the review and the attached materials. Journalists post their original stories on the training website. The number of stories is unlimited. Two reporters are writing in their native language, and for the training they post the translated stories, which have gone through the editing process in their agency. These stories are not assessed, but the codes are listed for the record. Those journalists who asked to reduce the amount of feedback, are given the marked copy with the focus on only one or two main problems.

The other training components include discussing questions which journalists had after reading reviewed stories via ICQ (instant messages system) or by email, discussing difficult issues in a forum, answering questions in quizzes, optional rewriting of articles after they have been reviewed, monitoring the progress of the results through the training and analysing repeated mistakes. It must be noted that journalists are extremely busy and sometimes write up to 15 news stories a day. The training project is sponsored by IREX (The International Research and Exchanges Board), a US-based non-profit organization conducting international education in academic research, professional training and technical assistance.

Use of the virtual textbook

The codes of the learning materials are inserted into the text of the reviews of news stories so that the copy and the learning materials can be read at the same time. The copy appears on the left side of the computer screen and the materials on the right side when a journalist clicks on the code in the text. Depending on the time available for the training, the journalist may choose to read other materials from the hyperlinked text, too.

The following extract represents the original and the review of the headline and the intro of a business story (translated by this researcher, names omitted). The journalist who wrote the story has seven months of experience in journalism.

The original headline and intro:
Ag Leasing is conducting negotiations to attract additional financing
AG Leasing is conducting negotiations with its partners on raising additional finance, the head of the company said on Monday.

The marked version:
Ag leasing is conducting negotiations to attract additional financing THIS IS NOT A CLEAR HEADLINE (1325a1). YOU SHOULD BE MORE DIRECT AND SAY SOMETHING LIKE: AG LEASING IS SEEKING FUNDING FOR… SAY WHAT FOR OR TO DO WHAT.
AG Leasing WHY IS THIS COMPANY IMPORTANT? WHY PEOPLE SHOULD READ ABOUT THIS COMPANY’S PROJECT? (911a1) – YOU SHOULD SAY,
FOR EXAMPLE, ‘AG LEASING, THE BIGGEST LEASOR OF AGRICULTURE MACHINERY IN SUCH AND SUCH COUNTRY’ is conducting negotiations with its partners on raising additional ‘ADDITIONAL’ IS AN ATTRIBUTE WHICH DESCRIBES NOTHING (1121a1), finance YOU SHOULD SAY HOW MUCH IT SEEKS (1224a8) AND WHAT FOR AND PUT IT BRIEFLY IN THE INTRO, the head of the company said on Monday. THIS INTRO IS NOT CLEAR AND IS NOT SAYING WHAT IS THE NEWS (1215).

EXPERIENCE IN THE USE OF THE VIRTUAL TEXTBOOK
It is quite easy to find the needed code to insert in the copy while marking. To do this, the three-digit code of the relevant description is inserted into the search engine, and then the relevant material is chosen from the variety of learning materials under the subsidiary codes.

The time spent by this author on marking news stories filed for the previous stage of this research (the pilot experiment conducted in February-March) ranged from 25 minutes to 2.5 hours (averaging 45 minutes) depending on the length and the complexity of each story. In that time, mistakes were explained and suggestions offered for each particular story. The virtual textbook allows the average time taken to be halved while most of the marking takes less than 30 minutes. Some journalists choose to be given only two or three main comments, saying that they cannot digest more. Such marking may take only a few minutes after reading the posted story depending on the gravity of the mistakes.

Feedback from the trainees

Journalists wrote in their answers to the mid-course questionnaire after 8 weeks of e-training that they can see the improvement in the quality of their work, but all added that they need to learn more.

As the effect of the training journalists became more interested in their work, wrote editor G.R.: “I think that despite a few problems my team started to write better compared with how they wrote earlier. There are still a lot of problems, but even the weakest journalists started to write better, and, most importantly, think differently. First, they started to ask me to delay publication because they needed to put in some additional background or some clarifying sentence, or correct something, they started to look into the core issues, and see the wood for the trees.”

Another editor, G.M., wrote that due to the training her team can now compare its news with the way international agencies write. “Of course we still have problems, but we need time to completely abandon the habits which were formed here over many years of working. The most important is that they [journalists] heard for the first time what democracy is, what the journalistic democratic values are and why democracy is important for our country.”

The third editor, C.S., wrote that because of time pressure it was difficult to find the time to participate in training when it just started, but as the e-training progressed, “some journalists who were initially passive, became more interested.”

All but three trainees who did not participate in the kick-off editorial workshop prior to e-training found the virtual book useful. They considered the learning materials on...
the training website “the most important part of the training” which allows them to “easily understand my mistakes, especially when I look at examples” (journalist G.D), a “very valuable, a good method” (journalist B.A), “very convenient to use” and helping to understand the trainer’s explanation and own mistakes (journalist Y.I), “helping a lot” (journalist N.R), “very useful because sometimes it is impossible to understand your mistake without them” (journalist M.M.), “helping a lot while writing stories” (I.S), “useful because it gives examples” (editor C.S), “very correctly and very understandably presented” (editor G.M) and “indication of the directions to follow” (editor G.R).

Two journalists wrote that the virtual book is convenient because it takes only a click on the code to learn while otherwise they would not have the time to turn to more extensive paper-based materials (Journalists B.A and N.S).

However, three participants, who missed the editorial training (two were on holiday and one is a foreign correspondent), found the materials hard to grasp and said that they are “too complicated” (Journalist V.K, who writes in her native language). Journalist I.B. wrote: “learning materials looked like they were parts of something, but what this something looks as a whole I could not understand. It was like learning to type without knowing where is which key. I started to understand what the training is about only when I obtained and read print-out materials.”

Journalist B. B., one of the lowest achievers at the training, said that the amount of feedback provided by using the codes while marking “makes it difficult to understand and does not allow you to concentrate on one problem”. This journalist had her biggest problem in understanding the need to substantiate the intro in a news story with relevant facts and figures (this material on the training website is only one page long). She complained two months into the training that the the reviewed stories with the attached materials for her look like “40 doors, and I don’t know which one I should knock at”. She was provided with a print out of instructive materials. However, three weeks later she still had not read them.

Intermediate results of the training

During the first 11 weeks of the e-training scheduled to last 17 weeks, news stories, written by journalists became more readable having lost heavy usage of technical and official jargon, more contextualised, more substantiated, and many have a source from ‘another side’ in a contentious story, which is a major breakthrough from the usual one-source stories. The average best score for a news story, which in the first three weeks of e-training was minus 2.4 points, increased to 20.9 points. The best individual result reached 46 points, which is the level short news stories of the leading world news agencies score. Still, the results are not stable and more work is needed so that journalists unlearn old habits and start to use new standards and style with the full understanding of what they are doing and why.

Readership of the news agency nearly tripled during the training period from 65,849 visits a week on August 12, when the editorial training started, to 186,574 on December 2, according to the rating website http://top.mail.ru/Rating/MassMedia/Today/Visitors/1.html. In the same period the main rival agency, which had 43,435 visits a week on August 12, remained at the
same level of readership with 43,175 visits a week in December 2. The second independent rival agency also stayed at the same level - 29,092 visits a week against 29,083, the third independent rival agency lost visitors -- 25,499 visits a week against 12,648.

The CEO of the agency was asked to explain whether the skyrocketed figures are linked to the results of the training. He wrote that it was indeed one of the factors which made the “product” – the news - more attractive: “Our brand, the product became cooler and weighs more. Plus some advertisement. Our city is not big, everything is becoming known very fast, especially when something attractive appears. Visits from overseas increased significantly. Also, our team became popular, people understand that elite journalists are working here, and they are attracted and interested. So I should say ‘yes, it can be [a result of the training] as opposed to your ‘it cannot be’. The most important is not to lose pace.”

The e-training is scheduled to be completed in mid-January 2008.

Intermediate conclusions and future research

The virtual textbook has been applied in a case study and, while still ongoing and scheduled to be completed in mid-January, is showing positive results.

When used as an extension of workplace face-to-face training, the virtual textbook is a convenient teaching and learning tool for e-training of professional journalists in developing countries. It saves the instructor’s time and provides instructional information to the trainees that helps them understand their problems and correct them.

Lack of quick progress may be explained by the deeply ingrained faulty habits of reporting, lack of time for training and lack of editorial standards (a house style). The development of this teaching tool may include further simplifying, shortening and increasing the number of learning materials so that the instruction becomes even more precise and targeted and therefore easier to use when having to combine training with working under deadline pressure.

Another important development to this tool is adding multimedia teaching instruments including video and interactive games, which could provide more entertainment and fun as opposed to just reading learning materials. However, this was not possible within the framework of this training because it is expensive.

This tool, despite being prepared for e-training for journalists in developing countries of the post-USSR, can be adapted and used in other countries or in classroom settings for marking news stories of journalism students. The culturally sensitive issues of this tool are examples, which must make sense to journalists in the countries where it is applied and they must be tailored specifically for this purpose.

References


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