John Beale: Teaching Philosophy

The mass media is experiencing a time of unprecedented upheaval and change. Evolving technologies and financial pressures are forcing companies to do more with less. To be competitive in the job market, students must be able to adapt by being competent with multiple skills while maintaining rock-solid ethics. My teaching philosophy is focused on training students to embrace constant change; become proficient in their journalistic skills; and adopt good ethical standards they will rely on throughout their careers.

Critical thinking is a benchmark of my teaching. I believe students must have the ability to solve problems and find solutions to issues that may be out of their control. I instill in my students that change is inevitable and their best work may come from situations they may have not anticipated. Students often face real-world problems while completing their assignments. Inclement weather, equipment problems and uncooperative subjects may give students a realistic sense of what it's like to be a working journalist.

I am a proponent of active learning in the classroom. Students are given reading assignments to complete before class begins. After a short lecture about the subject we are covering, students often work independently or in small groups to complete in-class assignments related to the lesson of the day. My classes have open critiques for each weekly assignment. Each student's work is projected and discussed. At the end of each critique the students vote to decide which student's work should be elevated to our "front page." Our discussions include not only technical aspects of how a student approached an assignment, but also issues of covering a diverse community, fairness and ethics. Every student's voice is heard. Individual students receive written feedback from me at the next class meeting.

I see my role as that of a coach and mentor. I try to offer support to help students get back on their feet quickly when things don't go as planned. My goal is to provide a delicate balance between pressuring students to do their best while providing a safe place to learn when things don't wrong. While I emphasize the importance of learning current software and technology, I stress that industry standards will change. I believe it is the student who develops fresh ideas and has the energy to pursue those ideas to fruition who will be most successful. I establish the framework for assignments but the students must develop their own ideas.

My assignments aren't academic exercises, but work that may be published and seen by an audience outside our classroom. Our projects are frequently offered to university and regional publications. In the last 15 months I've joined other professors taking students to cover the visit by Pope Francis in Washington, D.C., the Republican National Convention in Cleveland and Penn State's baseball team playing in Cuba. Work by students enrolled in my classes has been published in dozens of regional and national websites and publications, including The New York Times and The Associated Press.

I believe students will be better journalists if they are good people. To learn more about their communities, students in my 400-level photojournalism classes are required to volunteer their photographic services to an off-campus non-profit they choose. Students have volunteered for dozens of non-profits, including an agency that helps the homeless, a parochial schools and a museum.

It is important that I stay connected with what I am teaching. To stay current with the profession of journalism and connect my students with future employers, I continue to do photographic assignments and essays that are published in newspapers, magazines and websites regionally and internationally. In 2016 my photos have been published by publications ranging from the sports pages of The Washington Post and The Baltimore Sun, to the current magazine cover story in The Penn Stater. A multimedia package published by ESPN.com in October 2016 was shared more than 2700 times on social media.