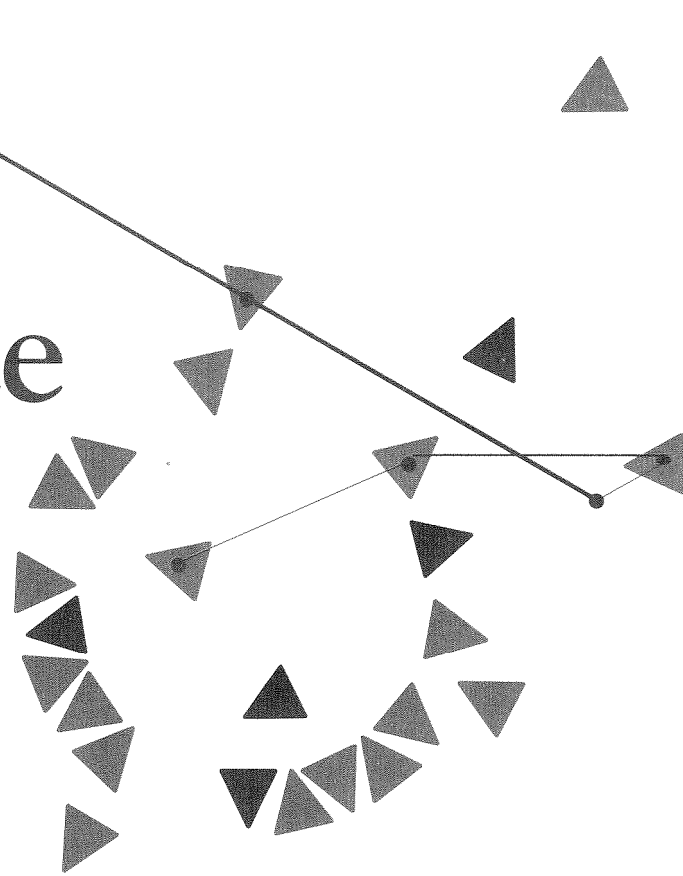


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# The Conference Course



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Course configurations are as numerous and diverse as are the instructors who teach them. And sometimes, a configuration emerges out of necessity that strikes a resonant chord with both instructor and student.

This was the case for COM 360, American Press, taught in Fall 1992. The course appeared in our cycle of courses at a time when we were implementing a major restructuring of our program. Originally, the course was part of our journalism sequence and had been designed as a history/issues course for upper-division journalism majors.

But we had subsumed our journalism track into a much broader mass media track, and we wanted to shift the approach of the course rather than continue in its present form. We had changed its name on paper to "Print Perspectives" to put greater emphasis on the issues portion, but the change had not totally cycled through the curriculum change process.

We decided to attempt a "conference course" wherein the students would plan and implement a campus-wide conference dealing with a specific issue of print communication. Rather than attempt to brainstorm general areas in class, I decided to have the conference on "The Future of Print Media of North Georgia."

I figured "the future" was broad enough for the students to be creative, but directive enough to avoid the analysis of past print events. The "North Georgia" part came from the underlying assumption that KSC is moving toward regional university status, and our region is North Georgia. I limited the area to outside I-285, west of I-400, and north of I-20. The students would also have to include students and professionals as audience and participants. With that skeletal outline, we began the quarter.

Needless to say, there was considerable anxiety among the 25 students in the class, especially since most upper-division students have come to expect detailed syllabi with clearly delineated assignments and grading criteria.

I tried to assuage these fears as much as possible by assuring them that I would be there every step of the way. Grading would include weekly logs, peer evaluation, my individual evaluation and, of course, a group grade for the conference itself.

The first order of business was to brief them on the typical structure of a one-day conference and to decide what exactly we would look at "in the future." We spent several days brainstorming all the possible elements when looking at the future of print communications. What was most gratifying was the amorphous and far-

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ranging discussions engendered by trying to define the important elements. The students not only pondered whom to invite, what to discuss, but why this was important for the audience (and them) to know.

Finally, we narrowed the elements down to six. Two of these were selected as “key” elements, and we decided to have plenary sessions for them and break-outs for the other four in pairs—one plenary and two break-outs in the morning, one plenary and two break-outs in the afternoon.

The topics (and their “conference titles”) were:

1. Community involvement (“Allies For the Future: How should communities and newspapers work together?”)
2. Environmental coverage (“Green Ink: How should media coverage of local environmental issues affect political decisions made?”)
3. Reporter training (“Who, When and Where: Community reporters and editors for the future.”)
4. Intrusive journalism (“How Far Is Too Far: How far should newspapers delve into the personal lives of politicians in the future?”)
5. The demise of newspapers (“Survival of the Fittest: Is print facing extinction?”)
6. Advertising (“Ad it Up: Where is the community advertising dollar going?”)

Once we had the basic “sections” done, students were placed in teams assigned to create a panel for each section. They were given carte blanche in terms of

recruiting, although all panelists had to be from the faculty or professional realm—and they couldn’t be paid.

The students soon discovered the vagaries of panel recruitment as participants were added, dropped and withdrew almost up to the day of the conference. However, they were merciless in their pursuit of participants. Position seemed to matter little to the students who hounded people all over the area. One group tried to get Zell Miller (prompted, no doubt, by my bet that if he came, they’d all get A’s). He didn’t come. But the participants they recruited included publishers, reporters, community leaders and Dennis Berry, newly-appointed president of the Atlanta Journal-Constitution.

Students were required to have a minimum of three panelists, a moderator and select one student as panel host and one student as panel emcee. The host was to make sure the panelists were in the right place at the right time. The emcee was to make the formal presentation of that panel.

While they were recruiting, students were also responsible for compiling a mailing list of “opinion leaders” in the counties of North Georgia. This was stored in a *Basics* program and mailing labels generated.

One group of students was assigned to design a mailer-invitation, which had to pass muster with the entire class. Of course, to put together the mailer, the production team had to coordinate with the panel teams. We also wanted a catchy title and logo, and—through group processing and inspiration—came up with *Press On: The Future of Print in North Georgia*.

To help in the growing coordination process, two students were selected to manage the bits and pieces. These students eventually took over the class, making

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sure people were on task, making sure information flowed quickly and accurately from group to group.

One major stumbling block was money. Although we were not paying participants and the meeting rooms were on campus, there were incidentals such as printing and coffee breaks to consider.

I wanted the students to be as independent as possible, so I said they would have to raise all funds for the conference themselves. More panic, then brainstorming, then another team. Our money team hit the phones. Within three weeks, they had pledges of \$300 and by "showtime" they had raised \$815.

By mid-quarter, our invitation list was pushing 700 and we thought our funds would have to go to printing the mailer. Then one of the students convinced her father and mother, local commercial printers, to donate the printing. Now we had our mailers.

We had also freed up a nice bit of money. We couldn't keep it ourselves, we didn't want to give it back, so we (figuratively) ate it. At first we had planned for students to provide coffee and donuts for participants and guests. They had agreed, without my saying a word, to each contribute \$10 to a food fund. But the donations made that unnecessary.

And so another team was formed, this one to work with Marriott to provide coffee breaks. The team quickly realized they not only had enough to get coffee, but could afford lunch for the participants. And so menus were debated in class. We even managed to get a local restaurant to donate two free dinners, which we decided to raffle off to participants.

Finally the mailers arrived, the labels printed and the class took on the tedious task of affixing labels to mailers.

The mailers had no sooner gone out than the production team started on the program, again seeking consensus in the class.

Things were falling into place, much to the amazement of the students. When we would review where we were and where we needed to go, the students seemed to marvel at their own initiative and ingenuity.

Finally the day arrived, and the students showed up ready to work. The seemingly hundreds of details were handled professionally and appropriately. I have had students making presentations for years, but I have never seen students so into a project as they were with "their" conference.

Panels ran—discussions enlightening, engrossing and sometimes heated. Lunch was superb, breaks went off without a hitch.

When it was all over, the students looked at each other and truly comprehended what they had been able to pull off in just over nine weeks.

Was the conference course a success? There is no doubt the students left the course with a much better understanding of the realities confronting the future of the print media. But more importantly, they learned the complexities of organizing a conference and had learned teamwork in a way not often available in the classroom.

We believe the course accomplished what it was intended to accomplish. So much so, that we'll do it again—with a new topic—this fall. ●

