

Best of Both Worlds

A WEBSITE FOR BREAKING NEWS, A PRINT MAGAZINE FOR IN-DEPTH STORIES

By Jill Ocone, CJE

Since I took over the reins of the journalism program at Manchester Township High School in 2007, our student journalists have historically produced both *Déjà vu*, our 224-page yearbook, and at least three printed issues of our newspaper, *The Talon*, each year. We lacked the capacity to go online for a variety of reasons. My students were already saddled with an immense workload filled with responsibilities for both

publications. Add to the equation a gamut of technological barriers, and going online was just not an option.

However, last year, our school switched to a semester block schedule that upended our program. Both district and school administration worked with me and my student journalists to iron out the kinks. Together, we've rebuilt the journalism program to incorporate real-world, hands-

on skills into the curriculum and the classroom on a year-long, every-other-day schedule. The arrival of a new digital platform presented itself at the right time, and the result has created growth in the classroom as my students are finally able to develop 21st century journalistic skill sets.

As the possibility of going digital became a reality, our student editorial staff decided the time had come to examine how the

program disseminated news to our school population. After a professional discussion and inquiry, the editorial team decided to change from producing a newspaper to a news magazine. They agreed that a news magazine format would allow writers to delve deeper into topics that were important to the Manchester Township High School community. Instead of producing informational articles based upon a date, they produced feature articles that told a deeper story, on topics including the heroin epidemic in Ocean County, the Black Lives Matter movement and human-interest profiles about fellow students who were making a positive impact both inside and outside the school.

I was in awe at how excited my student journalists were to see their work in the redesigned magazine, aptly titled The Talon 2.0. The switch to a news magazine format with a contemporary and professional design definitely increased reader engagement and improved the reputation of the publication.

What was missing from our program, however, was an outlet for breaking news and a way to reach beyond the boundaries of our school building.

Coincidentally, as our journalism program expanded into two advanced classes called Advanced Journalism and Career Journalism, the district switched to a new website host and format with blogging-type features. Both administration and our district public relations representative approached me about the possibility of having our student journalists produce online news content in addition to still producing a yearbook and the printed news magazine.

Thus, our online news site, The Talon 2.0 Cyber Edition, was born. (While the New Voices of New Jersey legislation re-establishing First Amendment rights of student journalists and protecting journalism teachers was introduced in the New Jersey legislature two years ago, the bill has not made much progress towards becoming law. For now, Hazelwood standards are our

norm as our district hosts our website.)

I was generously afforded time to update the course descriptions and curriculum for all of the classes under the Journalism umbrella, while incorporating the new online format and linking the most recent New Jersey Learning Standards to each standard/skill within the curriculum.

When introducing the new online site, Cyber Edition editor John Simonini wrote, "The Talon 2.0 Cyber Edition has begun a new era in not only Manchester Township High School's journalism program, but in the Manchester community as a whole. The way society operates in the 21st century, everything is circulated around the internet, and being online has become a necessity for The Talon. With access to posting on Manchester Township School District's website and then promoting through Twitter, the journalism program is looking forward to the opportunity they have been presented with: becoming a well-known, respected publication of news

throughout the Manchester community.”

Stories posted to The Talon 2.0 Cyber Edition site are strictly news in nature. Longer features that include opinion and research are reserved for the news magazine’s print edition, which will be produced three times this year.

One of the biggest benefits for student journalists is that they can see their work on the district website almost immediately. Our 85-minute classes allow for students to write a quick article, have it edited by one of our student editors in class, revise and edit, format the post to include a headline, image/ thumbnail, summary, keywords and categories, then submit it to be posted. Once an editor signs off on it, all I have to do is approve it to be posted, and it’s online in a matter of seconds.

Our district is now disseminating Cyber Edition stories written by Manchester’s student journalists as a part of their news and events coverage, and a local newspaper picked up and ran a story about



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our annual Veterans Recognition Ceremony written by junior Kaitlin Clutter. All of our district and building administration retweet links to our stories, and when students see that, it reassures them that their work is worthwhile.

And the results are immediate. “We can provide information and news at a faster rate compared

to the time it takes to produce a newspaper or a news magazine,” said Simonini.

Another advantage to generating stories that the entire Manchester community can read is that students are able to build their journalistic portfolios as they hone real-world journalistic skills in real time. Students are live-tweeting from school events and creating multimedia videos and slideshows to accompany their online stories, and the community as a whole supports our program now more than ever.

From writing and editing to layout and promotion on social media, student journalists who are involved in our journalism program will be prepared with skills that transcend across college majors and all careers, not just those in the realm of communications.

What made the difference for us is that everyone across the board worked together towards a common goal: turning our student journalists into professionals.



● The current Career Journalism class at Manchester Township High School. These students have had their work featured on The Talon 2.0 Cyber Edition, the school's new online news site. *Photo by Jill Ocone*