

Nathan Whitlock:

Welcome to NEXTcast, a podcast about teaching and learning at Humber College. I'm Nathan Whitlock, a professor at Humber College, and an editor at large to Humber Press. On NEXTcast, we talk to some of the faculty and staff who are leading innovation at Humber, both inside and outside the classroom. In this episode we speak to Dan Rowe, a professor and program coordinator in Humber's journalism program, about traveling with a group of students to cover the US democratic primaries.

Nathan Whitlock:

Welcome back to NEXTcast, Dan.

Dan Rowe:

Thanks, good to be back.

Nathan Whitlock:

You were here last year to talk about the documentary you had made together, your programs had made together. What's going on with the documentary, by the way?

Dan Rowe:

My understanding is that it's been shown to a lot of community groups and in a lot of classes. Specifically in the criminal justice, and social and community services programs. I know Aaron's been working on entering it into various competitions, and things like that so yeah, it's getting seen.

Nathan Whitlock:

That's excellent.

Dan Rowe:

Which is all I can ask for, I guess.

Nathan Whitlock:

Well, if anyone wants to learn more about that, just go back to that episode or look at the issue of NEXT Magazine where we did a big story about that. In this episode I wanted to talk to you about a trip you actually just got back from a couple of days ago.

Dan Rowe:

About a week and a half ago, two weeks ago. Yeah, two weeks actually.

Nathan Whitlock:

Okay, so not a couple of days.

Dan Rowe:

No, close enough, close enough.

Nathan Whitlock:

This was to New Hampshire to go cover the primaries. Tell me a little about how that came together.

Dan Rowe:

Sure, so it was something that I'd wanted to do for a while. The first time I heard of a journalism school doing that was when I was working on my PhD at Syracuse University, and a professor that I worked closely with there, she took a group of students while I was there to the New Hampshire primary, and I was sort of confused. I was like, "How can you just take a bunch of students and get access to all these events, where you have future potential presidents of the United States campaigning?" We had a long talk about it after she got back, and she explained the pros and cons of it. It was sort of something I kept in the back of my mind as something that could really be a great experience. In the last few years at Humber, and particularly in the faculty of media and creative arts, there's been much more capacity and much more of a push for international trips. Even though New Hampshire doesn't feel super international compared to some of the trips that people do.

Dan Rowe:

I pitched it through the process that's been set up in the faculty, but also, did some work with some of the, the faculty, the part-time faculty that teach in the program, including one professor. Richard Warnica from the National Post who in 2016 for the Post covered the primary, so I talked to him a fair bit about his experiences there and how he thought it would work for students. Then also Angela Murphy, who's the foreign editor for the Globe and Mail about the possibility of sort of building a one-off kind of class to sort of surround the trips so that it wasn't just students going and kind of being political and/or journalism tourists, but that they were actually gaining some knowledge about how they would cover something if they had been assigned to cover it, and what they might hopefully sort of learn from an experience of both being there, observing it and also working at the primaries.

Nathan Whitlock:

Just sort of outline this trip for us. How long was it and what were these sort of expectations around it?

Dan Rowe:

It was nine days long. We arrived in New Hampshire the day of the Iowa caucuses. The idea was-

Nathan Whitlock:

These are the now notorious Iowa caucuses.

Dan Rowe:

Yeah. We had a plan actually the first night it was like to go out for dinner and watch the results come in and we were going to get together as a group and find a place to watch it. We did do that and then there were no results.

Nathan Whitlock:

Still!

Dan Rowe:

Still unclear, technically, no real results.

Nathan Whitlock:

No real results.

Dan Rowe:

The idea was for the sort of nine days leading or eight to nine days leading up to the actual vote in New Hampshire to go cover as many events as possible, and there were sort of two or three sort of main kind of outcomes that we were looking for in terms of like actual output or journalistic output.

Dan Rowe:

One was producing stories for Skedline, which is a site where we post our students' work in sort of various formats. The idea was the students could sort of write or produce any type of story that they wanted to and as many as they wanted to. The thinking being that this was a really great opportunity to try lots of different types of stories. Some were event stories, some were talking to the supporters, some were talking to the colorful figures that kind of pop up around these events because of all the media attention that they get. We had one student who had a great time interviewing a fringe candidate who goes by the name of Vermin Supreme, he wears a rubber boot on his head and just sort of wanders around the periphery of all these events.

Dan Rowe:

All sorts of interesting characters who like show up at these, at these events, so to just write and produce as many stories as they want to get sort of as many reps and hopefully, that would be useful for not just the experience but also for when they're applying for jobs to be able to say that they've covered this wide range of very prominent sort of political story. The second part was the stuff that they had to do for the class. Angela asked them to keep kind of a journal, almost on a daily basis like what they learned, what they saw, things that they hope to sort of do better on the next day. Just kind of keeping track of like what they observed, what they felt about their own sort of reporting process and then if everything went smoothly, the sort of third thing that we had in mind was helping out potentially with the Globe's actual coverage of probably the election night itself or primary night itself.

Dan Rowe:

If anything happened along the way, again, if we happen to be at an event and something unforeseen, either amusing or serious happened and we were there, Angela was sort of keeping tabs on what the students were up to so that she could use it if that came to pass. Nothing sort of I guess thankfully, happened that was too shocking or anything like that at events that we were at. But they did get to help out with filing some quotes and some details on that primary night. A story that ended up running on the, I think on the Globe's-

Nathan Whitlock:

Oh, some actual student reported quotes got into Globe ?

Dan Rowe:

Yeah, and that was a really great experience for them because they had like a tight deadline. They had to worry about the copy editor and the web editor who were sitting back in the newsroom in Toronto, knowing that their shift was going to end at midnight and the quotes had to get to the reporter who was at a different event elsewhere in the state by a certain point so he could work them into his story and so

that could all get sort of posted in in time. It kind of took the experience that they had of posting stories on our own site to sort of a very different level.

Nathan Whitlock:

How did the students respond? How did this group of students respond to that experience, to that pressure?

Dan Rowe:

That to me is the most impressive and exciting thing to see. I asked them in our car after, we were driving in the rental car headed home and I said, "Would you like to do that again? Like if I said, "We're going to," if I handed them all tickets and said, "We're going to Nevada and we're going to do this again and you're going to have deadlines to meet for the next set of vote," they were like, "I would get on the plane right now and do that." A couple of them said they really enjoyed like the adrenaline rush of having to file quotes and knowing that there were all these deadlines to meet and also, the payoff of seeing their names credited on the story a half hour or so after they actually filed the material.

Dan Rowe:

They seemed to really like that. In general, the most rewarding thing for me was seeing the way that they responded to the whole sort of situation. Again, there's media from around the world. They're like, "Hi, I'm from Humber college and I'm reporting for Skedline, can we get credentials?" They sort of don't think that they should get those credentials, and they were getting them and they felt increasingly comfortable as the nine days went on talking to people about their own work. They sort of, at first, they would often feel when they're in like a press area, they felt kind of strange to like take seats at a table. They're like, they're sort of like looking over their shoulder and like, "Well, does someone else want this?" Then eventually, "Is someone doing real work that's going to want to sit here?"

Dan Rowe:

Then eventually they're like, "Let's get that table over there because it's really good and it's close to the alleyway to the front so we can see, get around the cameras and see the speech when it starts if we want to."

Nathan Whitlock:

Sort of get in the game.

Dan Rowe:

Yeah, and they, again, at one point they were like, "It doesn't even really feel like school." They're like, it just feels like they were doing work, which in a lot of ways was the goal, that they would feel comfortable in a pressure-packed and very intense situation like this and sort of forget the fact that they were students and just feel like reporters just doing the job that they're sort of studying for and training to be in and feel like they were doing that instead of being a student and observing it.

Nathan Whitlock:

What about yourself? If someone had asked you that same question that you asked the students, would you get on a plane or get in a bus and go cover a Nevada right now or you're ready to get ready for your own bed by the end of that?

Dan Rowe:

Yeah, I was ready to get home. It was a really ... I enjoyed the experience. Again, seeing the students grow and also, there were four students that have traveled with me, so the ratios are really good in terms of being able to talk to them about different things that would come up. Also, just the quick sort of reaction times like we'd ... After covering an event and often they'd be writing a story while they're working at an event and then we'd all again, jumped in the van and drive off to like whatever our next sort of stop for the day was and before they put music on, I would ask them some questions or I had mentioned something that came up that maybe they should do at the next stop.

Dan Rowe:

That was kind of a really effective way to teach weirdly enough, because you were able to sort of in the moment sort of give them kind of, not even like the specific feedback but the general feedback and talk about what happened instead of like making notes and say, "Okay, I need to talk about this next week and hope that by the time we meet next week something else hasn't happened that's more important to talk about," or that the students that this most effected are actually going to be in class next week. It was really useful to be able to go to something, report on it in real time and then kind of talk about it immediately after and talk about not just what they did and what they could do differently, but also how they sort of felt about it too.

Nathan Whitlock:

Right. To have that on focus too, where you're not going back to their own lives, their own jobs, their own friends and family. They're actually, they just have this one job.

Dan Rowe:

Yeah, it was all they had to do, and I kept saying too all along the way, I was like, "If you want to take some time," because our days were often, the shortest ones were probably like eight or 10 hours and then there were some times 12 to 15 and sometimes longer. I kept saying, "You don't have to come to everything if you want to take a morning off or an evening off, we can manage that and you're welcome to do that." As it went on, they were increasingly wanting to start the day earlier because again, it was like that's what they were there for. Again, it didn't feel like they were ... Some of them publish more stories in that nine day stretch than they would normally in like a semester long class, because they were there and they were sort of focused on it like you said. That really I think helped with both on the teaching side and on the learning side of things.

Nathan Whitlock:

Well, that's incredibly impressive. When this episode goes up, we'll link to those stories and let people read those student-written stories from the scene. I'm also just as interested in how that novelty candidate that you-

Dan Rowe:

Vermin Supreme? Yeah.

Nathan Whitlock:

Vermin Supreme, he may take it all.

This transcript was exported on Apr 06, 2020 - view latest version [here](#).

Dan Rowe:

You never know.

Nathan Whitlock:

Come back kid.

Dan Rowe:

Yeah. Let's hope.

Nathan Whitlock:

Well, thank you so much, Dan, for coming back on NEXTcast. It's been great to have you.

Dan Rowe:

It's been good, thanks.

Nathan Whitlock:

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