

# Teaching Print, Broadcast, and Online Journalism Concurrently: A Case Study Assessing a Convergence Curriculum

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*About 60% of U.S. journalism schools are preparing students to work across multiple media platforms. In fall 2002, the University of Southern California launched a Convergence Core Curriculum (CCC) in which all journalism students learned print, broadcast, and online journalism concurrently. Both students and instructors reported that the classes slowed the learning process, and that class content was diluted. However, students nevertheless showed marked improvement in key skills. These results and a review of the relevant literature provide insight for educators and practitioners as they assess convergence teaching practices.*

## Introduction

“Convergence” has become one of the most hotly contested topics among journalism educators. Defined for the purposes of this paper as teaching students to think, report, and write across print, broadcast, and online media platforms, numerous convergence courses and/or new convergence curriculums have been introduced at journalism schools across the country in recent years. While some educators strongly believe that teaching students how to work in more than one medium

will better prepare them for future jobs, others argue that journalism schools should instead put a stronger emphasis on critical thinking, and basic writing, reporting, and grammar skills. This article addresses these issues by reviewing existing convergence education research, describing the University of Southern California’s Annenberg School of Journalism’s new Convergence Core Curriculum (CCC), and presenting baseline data from two in-depth surveys of students and instructors that assessed the CCC, which was launched during the fall of 2002.

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## Literature Review

The topic of media convergence began appearing in trade publications as early as 1994, when veteran journalist John Seigenthaler, founder of The Freedom Forum's First Amendment Center, predicted a new sort of journalism education that "will train the student for citizenship in a technology-saturated new information age, in which there will be a marvelous multifaceted array of career opportunities."<sup>1</sup> During the past decade, most schools have been forced to contemplate the issue of convergence. A survey by Huang found that between 1998 and 2002, "about 60 percent of the J-schools in the United States redesigned their curricula or developed new courses to prepare students for practicing news in multiple media platforms."<sup>2</sup> His survey also found that the majority of respondents agreed that journalism students should learn how to write for multiple media platforms, and that they need to learn "to cooperate and collaborate across newsrooms so as to bridge different newsroom cultures."<sup>3</sup> Another study by Criado and Kraeplin found that nearly 85%, or almost nine out of ten of the 240 university programs surveyed, have adopted or were in the process of adopting convergence curriculum. The same study also noted that most of these changes "represent a minor shift" that "accommodate the industry emphasis on convergence" and are not complete revamps of the curriculum.<sup>4</sup>

Technological advances and the new media landscape have been two major catalysts for change at J-schools. There is no denying that the Internet has allowed online journalism to flourish. At the same time, the Federal Com-

munications Commission (FCC) ruling on 2 June 2003 that eased restrictions on media ownership has sparked even more interest about convergence among journalism educators. The FCC ruling allows media organizations to own and operate a newspaper, a television affiliate, and a Web site in the same market. That means they can provide news together as a "team" instead of as "competitors." Given this conglomeration of ownership, it stands to reason that future newsroom hires may be expected to have at least a rudimentary understanding of how the three media work, and perhaps even to work in more than one media.

More than thirty years ago, Highton wrote that "journalism educators were bitterly split into two camps, the 'green eyeshades' and the 'chisquares'—also called the "communicationists."<sup>5</sup> A difference of opinion continues to exist today between journalism educators and professional journalists over the teaching of theory-based media courses versus a more practical skills-based approach, according to a survey by Dickson and Brandon.<sup>6</sup> An understanding of convergence and the technological skills needed to work across media platforms has added another element to this ongoing debate between academics and professionals. Criado and Kraeplin wrote, "The responsibility of training journalists for convergence work rests with both the media industry and the academy. Currently, the bulk of the responsibility seems to rest with the academy. Despite the growing demand for convergence skills, cross-platform training is not taking place on the job."<sup>7</sup>

Bulla and Dodd have dubbed schools that have adopted convergence courses "innovators," while schools

that stick to traditional approaches are called “non-adapters.”<sup>8</sup> Innovators argue that “the principles of writing for each of the major media—print, broadcast, and online—are remarkably similar; therefore, teaching students to write for each platform reinforces basic principles of effective writing. The view is that clear, concise, and accurate writing in deadline situations serves all three media well.”<sup>9</sup> Daniels classifies current journalism programs in not two but three ways: converged, non-converged and mixed.<sup>10</sup> A converged curriculum is one that dismantles sequences such as news-editorial, magazines, and broadcast news, and replaces the teaching of medium-specific courses with multi-platform courses. Nonconverged programs may offer multimedia courses such as Web journalism, but they train students in a specific medium and de-emphasize multi-platform training. In between these two extremes are programs that offer both training in a specific media, and multi-platform training. USC’s Annenberg School of Journalism would fall into this category.<sup>11</sup>

Educators agree that the traditional elements of journalism—critical thinking, excellent reporting and writing skills, ethics, balance, fairness, and impartiality—should not only remain, but be strengthened. Differences arise, however, over how much technology *should be taught in schools*. Lowry and Becker write that skill with presentation technology stands as a significant predictor of securing a job in journalism, even when controlling for GPA, sequence specialization, number of internships and campus media activities. If media technology and media processes continue to converge, as many industry experts predict, these

authors conclude that it seems likely presentation software skill will grow in importance.<sup>12</sup>

Similarly, Gil Thelen argues that the risk of incorporating multimedia training into a standard curriculum is small and the potential benefits huge. Based on his experience as executive editor at the News Center in Tampa, Fla., Thelen suggests to journalism educators that “The fully formed, all-purpose, multiplatform, gadget-laden journalism grad is NOT what we’re looking to hire [...]. Journalism schools must continue to produce graduates who are competent in one craft area: reporting, design, producing, directing, editing.”<sup>13</sup> At the same time, journalists need to adapt to the twenty-four-hour news cycle demanded by an increasingly global audience. “Editors and TV producers generally agree that journalists with strong writing and critical-thinking skills, who can adapt quickly, have an edge over prospective reporters able to work in just one medium.”<sup>14</sup>

The belief by nonadapters that an emphasis on technology and cross-platform skills is misguided is best exemplified by Thomas Kunkel, dean of the University of Maryland School of Journalism, who wrote: “Our conviction is that strong reporting, editing and writing are skills that transcend ‘platforms’ and will be in demand any time and any place.”<sup>15</sup> Bulla and Dodd argue that “the non-adopters of convergence believe their plates are already full with lessons devoted to news, feature and opinion writing as well as less on public relations and advertising writing.”<sup>16</sup> Additional roadblocks cited are the lack of credit hours to include the components of convergence content; lack of willing

cooperation among faculty from different sequences, and lack of expertise, interest, or even time for some instructors to develop new convergence courses.<sup>17</sup> Another hurdle is the ratio of journalism courses and liberal arts courses, which is limited by the accreditation standards outlined by the Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communications (ACEJMC).

### ***University of Southern California's Convergence Core Curriculum (CCC)***

The USC Annenberg School of Journalism, a professionally oriented program, began reviewing its curriculum in 2001. The curriculum was print oriented and had changed very little during the past twenty years. The goal of the new three-semester CCC was to give students in every major—print, broadcast, or online—a foundational understanding of cross-platform journalism. During the first semester, students took news writing for print, broadcast, and online. The second semester focused on reporting for print, broadcast, and online, and the third semester focused on editing/production for print, broadcast, and online. Within each semester, students took these courses concurrently. These courses were team taught, with a print, broadcast, and online instructor teaching the same group of students. The instructor teams were supposed to communicate regularly about assignments and the progress of their students.

New fact sheets, readings, a CD-ROM with video, and an instructor's manual were developed for the CCC's

news writing course. Instructors also participated in a CCC list serve, and received weekly e-mail newsletters. The "convergence" was supposed to take place in the readings and assignments, where students wrote the same stories for print, broadcast, and online. It also was supposed to take place in the online course, where the best of print and broadcast came together on the Web. Instructors used a standardized syllabus to ensure that key topics were being covered, and that readings and assignments were synchronized.

The driving force behind developing concurrent courses was to make sure students received enough writing, reporting, and editing/production instruction in each of the three media. The USC faculty decided that trying to teach students about all three in one or perhaps two "media" courses during a single semester or quarter alone would not adequately prepare them to work in any single medium, let alone in a convergence setting. The goal was not to produce students who were "jacks-of-all-trades, but masters of none." It was to produce students who could walk into their first jobs in print, broadcast, or online and hit the ground running, but who also would have a good working knowledge of other media as more media companies continue to explore convergence. The USC faculty felt these skills would make students more marketable, help them easily switch from print to broadcast or vice versa in the future, and help them become future newsroom leaders. A key goal of the new curriculum was to make sure that the "basics" of critical thinking, writing, research, and reporting were not traded for technological wizardry.

## ***Student and Instructor Surveys following the First Semester of the CCC***

Some of the faculty echoed concerns noted earlier that a convergence curriculum might dilute the teaching of key journalistic skills such as writing and critical thinking. Surveys were given to both students and instructors in the news writing course to assess the first semester of the CCC. The present research was designed to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: Did the convergence curriculum dilute teaching?

RQ2: Did the convergence curriculum slow down the learning process?

RQ3: How did students and instructors rate students' growth over the course of the semester in key journalistic skills such as writing and critical thinking?

RQ4: How did the students and instructors rate the implementation of the convergence curriculum?

RQ5: Would students and instructors recommend the CCC (either as is or with changes)?

RQ6: Did students and instructors believe there was value in learning how to write across all three media?

The first three research questions directly address the fears of many instructors that it would be impossible to teach students how to conceptualize and write about stories for print, broadcast, and online media outlets at the same time. They argued that trying to do so would slow down the learning process and dilute students' ability to write for each specific medium, which would leave them less prepared to move on to upper-division courses. Obviously, the evaluation of any curriculum would be heavily influenced by an individual's experience with a specific curriculum. Thus, the fourth and fifth research questions were designed to assess the implementation of the convergence curriculum (e.g., the clarity of the CCC's standardized syllabus; the synchronization of the CCC's writing assignments; and the grade given to the CCC by students and instructors). Finally, the sixth research question assessed the extent to which students and instructors saw the value of or "bought into" the idea of convergence education.

## ***Methodology***

In December 2002, during the last week of the fall semester, both students and instructors were surveyed regarding their experience with the CCC. The student survey had 80 questions, and the instructor survey had 65 questions. For present purposes we will be focusing on only a subset of items that allow us to answer the above research questions. Students and instructors were asked to evaluate the program from their perspective. The order and wording of the questions were roughly parallel throughout both versions. For example, whereas students were asked

**Table 1**  
**THE CCC DILUTED THE TEACHING OF EACH OF THE THREE SEQUENCES—**  
**PRINT, BROADCAST, AND ONLINE**

Questions 74, 60:	Students		Instructors	
	Frequency	Valid Percentage	Frequency	Valid Percentage
1. Strongly Disagree	2	1.5	6	20.0
2. Disagree	11	8.0	5	16.7
3. Neutral	50	36.5	3	10.0
4. Agree	40	29.2	14	46.7
5. Strongly Agree	34	24.8	2	6.7
N	137	100.0	30	100.1
Overall mean	3.679		3.033	
Mode	3.000		4.000	

to compare *their skills* in a number of specific areas at the beginning and end of the semester, instructors were asked to compare *their students' skills* in these same areas at the beginning and end of the semester. Both the student and instructor surveys also included a section on demographics and space where respondents could discuss the CCC more specifically and suggest changes to the program.

Both versions of the survey were self-administered via paper and pencil and were completely anonymous, with no identifying information requested. On average the surveys took one half hour to complete. Completed surveys were placed in a sealed manila envelope and returned to the researchers. Of the 169 undergraduate students who took the CCC classes, 140 completed and returned their surveys for a response rate of 83%. Of the 35 instructors who taught in the program, 30 completed and returned their surveys for a response rate of almost 86%. The resultant data

was then input and analyzed using SPSS software.

## Results

RQ1: Did the convergence curriculum dilute teaching?

Both students and instructors were asked about whether the CCC diluted the teaching of each of the three sequences—print, broadcast, and online. On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being "Strongly Disagree," 3 being "Neutral," and 5 being "Strongly Agree," the mean student response was 3.679, which roughly corresponds to "Agree" (the most common or modal response was 3 or "Neutral"). The instructors were clearly divided on this question with 53% agreeing or strongly agreeing that the CCC did dilute the teaching while 37% disagreed or strongly disagreed. This resulted in an overall mean of 3.033, and a modal response of 4. A *t*-test comparing the means revealed that overall the students were significantly

**Table 2**  
**THE CCC SLOWED DOWN THE PROCESS OF LEARNING HOW TO WRITE FOR EACH**  
**OF THE THREE SEQUENCES—PRINT, BROADCAST, AND ONLINE**

Questions 75, 61:	Students		Instructors	
	Frequency	Valid Percentage	Frequency	Valid Percentage
1. Strongly Disagree	5	3.6	6	20.0
2. Disagree	25	18.0	5	16.7
3. Neutral	38	27.3	2	6.7
4. Agree	40	28.8	15	50.0
5. Strongly Agree	31	22.3	2	6.7
<i>N</i>	139	100.0	30	100.1
Overall mean	3.482		3.067	
Mode	4.000		4.000	

more likely than the instructors to believe that the CCC diluted the teaching of journalism ( $t [165] = 3.042, p = .003$ ).

RQ2: Did the convergence curriculum slow down the learning process?

Both students and instructors were asked about whether the CCC slowed down the process of learning how to write for print, broadcast, and online. On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being "Strongly Disagree," 3 being "Neutral," and 5 being "Strongly Agree," the mean for students was 3.482, falling between "Neutral" and "Agree" with "Agree" being the most common response. Once again, the instructors were more divided with 57% reporting that the CCC did slow down the learning process and 37% disagreeing. Thus, the overall instructors' mean of 3.067, or "Neutral," is somewhat misleading. Moreover, the mean difference between students and instructors on this item is not statistically significant ( $t [167] = 1.76, NS$ ).

RQ3: How did students and instructors rate students' growth over the course of the semester in key journalistic skills such as writing and critical thinking?

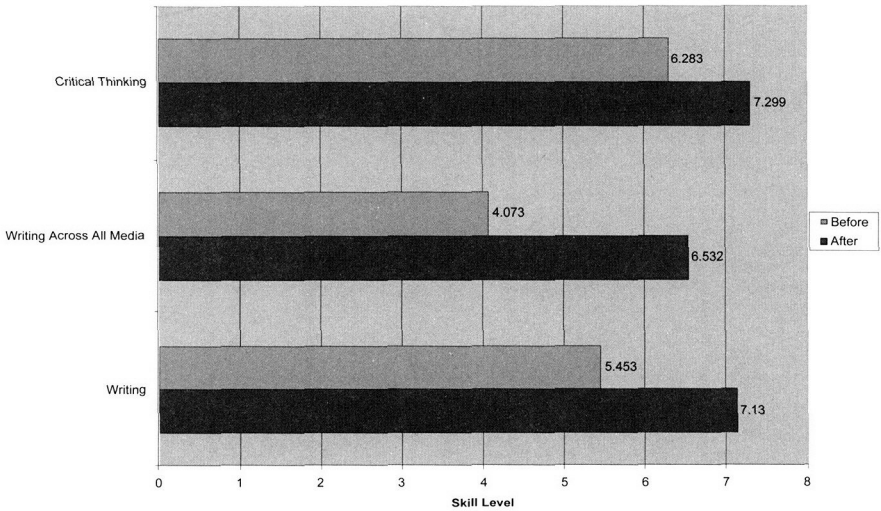
Students and instructors were asked to assess and compare students' skills in specific areas *at the beginning of the semester and by the end of the semester*. A 9-point scale was used with 1 being "Extremely Weak," 5 being "Average," and 9 being "Extremely Strong." Don't know responses were excluded.

### **Student Assessment**

**Critical Thinking.** At the beginning of the semester, the *student* mean was 6.283, or "Slightly Above Average." By the end of the semester, the overall student mean rose to 7.299, or "Above Average." This difference is highly statistically significant ( $t [136] = 9.272, p = .001$ ).

**Writing across All Three Media.** At the beginning of the semester, the

Figure 1  
STUDENT ASSESSMENT



student mean was 4.073, or "Slightly Below Average." By the end of the semester, the overall student mean increased to 6.532, or "Above Average." This difference is highly statistically significant ( $t [137] = 18.203, p = .001$ ).

**Writing.** At the beginning of the semester, the overall student mean was 5.453, or "Average." By the end of the semester, the overall student mean jumped to 7.130, or "Above Average." This difference is highly statistically significant ( $t [137] = 11.556, p = .001$ ).

### Instructor Assessment

**Critical Thinking.** Instructors noticed an even greater shift. At the beginning of the semester, instructors

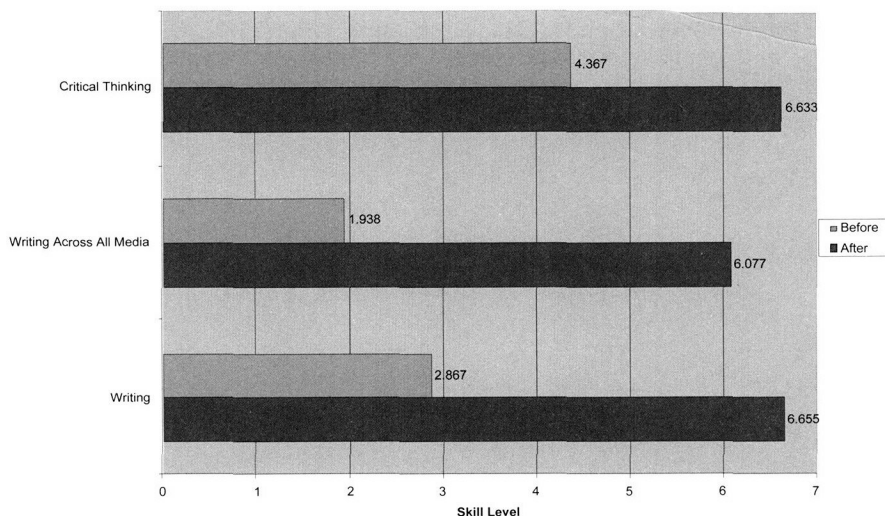
gave their students a mean of 4.367, or "Slightly Below Average." By the end of the semester, that mean increased to 6.633, or "Above Average." This difference is highly statistically significant ( $t [29] = 8.500, p = .001$ ).

**Writing across All Media.** At the beginning of the semester, instructors gave their students a mean of 1.938, or "Weak." By the end of the semester, that mean increased to 6.077, or "Slightly Above Average." This difference is statistically significant ( $t [12] = 9.442, p = .001$ ).

**Writing.** At the beginning of the semester, instructors gave their students a mean of 2.867, or "Below Average." By the end of the semester, that mean increased to 6.655, or "Above Average." This difference is statistically significant ( $t [28] = 11.734, p = .001$ ).



**Figure 2**  
**INSTRUCTOR ASSESSMENT**



RQ4: How did the students and instructors rate the implementation of the convergence curriculum?

The survey included three indicators that measure the success of this particular implementation of a convergence curriculum. First, students and instructors were asked to assess the clarity of the CCC's standardized syllabus. On a scale of 1 to 7, with 1 being "Extremely Poor," 4 being "Neutral," and 7 being "Extremely Good," the mean for students was 3.979, or "Neutral" whereas the mean for instructors was 5.276, or "Good." Second, students and instructors were asked to assess the synchronization of the CCC's writing assignments. Using the same scale, the mean for students was 3.892, or "Neutral." The mean for instructors was also "Neutral" at 4.276.

Finally, both students and instructors were asked to assign an overall grade to the CCC. These grades were converted to interval data by assigning the lowest possible score of "1" to a grade of "F" and the highest possible score of "13" to a grade of "A+" (see Table 3). Students' average grade for the CCC was a 6.293 or "C" (the modal response was also a "C"). Instructors gave the CCC an average grade of 8.433 or "B-." ("B" was the modal response). Thus, instructors gave the CCC a significantly higher grade than students ( $t [168] = 4.21, p = .001$ ).

RQ5: Would students and instructors recommend the CCC (either as is or with changes)?

Students were asked whether they would recommend the CCC to other

**Table 3**  
**OVERALL, WHAT GRADE WOULD YOU ASSIGN TO THE CCC THIS SEMESTER?**

Questions 80, 65:	Students		Instructors	
	Frequency	Valid Percentage	Frequency	Valid Percentage
1. F	8	5.7	0	0.0
2. D-	4	2.9	0	0.0
3. D	9	6.4	1	3.3
4. D+	13	9.3	0	0.0
5. C-	22	15.7	1	3.3
6. C	23	16.4	2	6.7
7. C+	8	5.7	2	6.7
8. B-	18	12.9	7	23.3
9. B	20	14.3	10	33.3
10. B+	8	5.7	5	16.7
11. A-	6	4.3	1	3.3
12. A	1	.7	1	3.3
13. A+	0	0.0	0	0.0
<i>N</i>	140	100.0	30	100.0
Overall mean	6.293		8.433	
Mode	6.000		9.000	

students as it currently exists, while instructors were asked about the chances they would teach again in the CCC as it currently exists. On a scale of 1 to 7, with 1 being "Extremely Poor," 4 being "Neutral," and 7 being "Extremely Good," the mean for students was 2.907 or "Poor" (with the most common response being "Extremely Poor") whereas the instructor mean was 5.5, or between "Good" and "Very Good." (with the modal response being "Extremely Good"). This obvious difference of opinion with instructors being far more positive than students was highly significant ( $t [168] = 8.51, p = .001$ ).

Students were then asked whether they would recommend the CCC if changes were made to the curriculum, while instructors were asked about the

chances they would teach again in the CCC if changes were made to the curriculum. Using the same 7-point scale, the mean for students was 5.057, or "Good" while the instructors' mean was 6.267, or "Very Good" (with 100% of instructors saying Good, Very Good, or Excellent). Thus, once again, instructors were significantly more positive about the convergence curriculum than students ( $t [168] = 5.49, p = .001$ ).

RQ6: Did students and instructors believe there was value in learning how to write across all three media?

Both students and instructors were asked whether there was value in learning how to write across all three media, while instructors were asked whether there was value in teaching

**Table 4**  
**CHANCES THAT YOU WOULD RECOMMEND THE CCC TO OTHER STUDENTS**  
**AS IT CURRENTLY EXISTS?**

Question 13:	Students		Instructors	
	Frequency	Valid Percentage	Frequency	Valid Percentage
1. Extremely Poor	37	26.4	0	0.0
2. Very Poor	25	17.9	0	0.0
3. Poor	26	18.6	2	6.7
4. Neutral	24	17.1	5	16.7
5. Good	22	15.7	8	26.7
6. Very Good	6	4.3	6	20.0
7. Extremely Good	0	0.0	9	30.0
<i>N</i>	140	100	30	100.1
Overall mean	2.907		5.500	
Mode	1.000		7.000	

students how to write across all three media. On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being "Strongly Disagree," 3 being "Neutral," and 5 being "Strongly Agree," the mean for students was 4.007, or "Agree." The mean for instructors was 4.233, or "Agree." Thus, there was no significant difference between students and instructors with respect to the perceived value of the curriculum ( $t(167) = 1.25$ , NS).

## Discussion

Did a convergence curriculum that tried to teach journalism students to think, report, and write across print, broadcast, and online platforms achieve its intended goal? Or, as skeptics feared, did it dilute and impede the learning process? The report card for the first semester of the University of Southern California's Convergence Core Curriculum in Journalism was decidedly mixed. For example, the majority of students and more than half

of the instructors tended to believe that the convergence curriculum diluted the teaching of journalism and "slowed down" the learning process. These negative perceptions stand in stark contrast to the substantial increase in journalistic skills experienced by students over the course of the semester. Both students and their professors reported sharp increases among students in each of three key areas—critical thinking, writing, and writing across print, broadcast, and online media.

These seemingly inconsistent results may be explained, in part, by the discontent voiced by both students and instructors with the specifics of the implementation of the curriculum. Students gave the CCC as they experienced it a grade of "C" and only 20% indicated that they would be likely to recommend it to others in its current form. With changes, however, 75% of students said chances were good that they would recommend the curriculum to others. Instructors were less harsh,

**Table 5**  
**CHANCES THAT YOU WOULD TEACH AGAIN IN THE CCC AS IT CURRENTLY EXISTS?**

Question 14:	Students		Instructors	
	Frequency	Valid Percentage	Frequency	Valid Percentage
1. Extremely Poor	1	0.7	0	0.0
2. Very Poor	2	1.4	0	0.0
3. Poor	10	7.1	0	0.0
4. Neutral	23	16.4	0	0.0
5. Good	58	41.4	4	13.3
6. Very Good	31	22.1	14	46.7
7. Extremely Good	15	10.7	12	40.0
N	140	100.0	30	100.0
Overall mean	5.057		6.267	
Mode	5.000		6.000	

giving the curriculum an overall grade of "B-." In addition, 77% of instructors said they would recommend it in its current form, and 100% said chances were good they would do so with changes.

These survey results, along with focus groups of students and instructors, helped determine what changes should be made to the CCC for the fall of 2003. First, although instructors rated the clarity of the standardized syllabus as "Good," on the survey, they strongly objected to this standardization during meetings and in the open-ended comment section. As a result, the syllabus was made more flexible.

Second, although instructors rated the synchronization of the writing assignments as "Neutral" on the survey, they strongly objected to many of these assignments during meetings and in the open-ended comment section. They argued that some stories ending up as briefs in newspapers, for instance, may lead local television news-

casts because they have good pictures (i.e., video). As a result, efforts to use the same fact sheets to teach students how to write across platforms sometimes confused and frustrated their students. For the second go-around of the CCC, instructors were asked to synchronize assignments only where it made sense to do so.

Third and most important, both students and instructors agreed that there was value in learning how to write across all three media—print, broadcast, and online. This suggests that while problems existed in the particular implementation described here, there is support among students and instructors for the concept of convergence education.

Convergence will continue to be a controversial topic in journalism education. Research shows that most U.S. journalism schools are changing their curriculums to try to teach students cross-platform skills despite barriers such as cost, a lack of trained faculty,

**Table 6**

**THERE IS VALUE IN LEARNING HOW TO WRITE ACROSS ALL THREE MEDIA—PRINT, BROADCAST, AND ONLINE; THERE IS VALUE IN TEACHING HOW TO WRITE ACROSS ALL THREE MEDIA—PRINT, BROADCAST, AND ONLINE:**

Question 57:	Students		Instructors	
	Frequency	Valid Percentage	Frequency	Valid Percentage
1. Strongly Disagree	2	1.4	0	0.0
2. Disagree	10	7.2	1	3.3
3. Neutral	17	12.2	2	6.7
4. Agree	66	47.5	16	53.3
5. Strongly Agree	44	31.7	11	36.7
<i>N</i>	139	100.0	30	100.0
Overall mean	4.007		4.233	
Mode	4.000		4.000	

and skepticism from students and instructors, to name a few. However, few studies have attempted to evaluate the various ways to teach convergence, although the need for such research is clear. The surveys of USC students and instructors were conducted to establish a basis for comparison for follow-up studies that will track the changes, successes, and failures of the Convergence Core Curriculum. Long-term studies must be conducted because the value of a convergence education may not be immediately apparent. As researchers at Brigham Young University warned in 1996, educators should “not expect students or potential employers to recognize the short-term benefit of working in a converged newsroom. The benefits may be years away.”<sup>18</sup>

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