

# Journalists in charge of their own training

*NewsU uses the Web to deliver training that is targeted, focused and always accessible*

BY HOWARD I. FINBERG

Journalism training is now wired, and it's the future.

It's also fun. With more than 25 courses, 10 training partners and more than 8,000 registered users, News University is the future of online journalism training. NewsU, created by The Poynter Institute with a grant from the Knight Foundation, offers journalists the online training they want anytime — no matter where they live or work.

While this isn't the first attempt at electronic journalism training, NewsU reflects the Internet revolution that is reshaping our industry and our consumers. NewsU is a different kind of online training.

NewsU takes advantage of the Web to deliver training that is targeted, focused and always accessible. If you have access to the Internet, you have access to NewsU. The courses use standard Web-based design and interactivity tools, so there's no need for special equipment or software.

And, like parts of the Web, NewsU is fun. NewsU offers engaging, interactive courses that give journalists "just in time training" to meet a specific need.

The NewsU creators recognize that e-learning can't replace the interaction in a seminar. Rather than replicate the training a journalist might get at The Poynter Institute, the American Press Institute, NewsTrain or any number of local, regional and national conventions, NewsU creates a different experience.

Rather than a 16-week online course

**Who:** News University or NewsU, an online training portal for journalists, a project of The Poynter Institute for Media Studies, St. Petersburg, Fla.

**What:** Interactive learning for journalists, journalism students and others. More than 8,673 have registered on the site.

**When:** Launched April 11, 2005

**Where:** On the Web at <http://www.newsu.org>

**How:** Created with a five-year, \$2.8 million grant to The Poynter Institute from the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation

on writing and reporting, NewsU has a two- to three-hour e-learning module on revising stories or sharpening interviewing skills. Rather than merely reading screen after screen of text, NewsU's courses let you practice what you've learned by taking quizzes, playing games and communicating online with other participants.

NewsU's philosophy is that participants learn by doing. Therefore, interactivity is fundamental to NewsU training. For example, to assess your skills, you might play a game or solve a puzzle. And

NewsU, unlike some other online training, makes sure participants learn from both right and wrong answers.

Other activities give participants a chance to apply what they've learned in the course. And because much of the content is in small sections accompanied by interactive learning, participants can start and stop courses on their schedule. A course doesn't have to be completed in one sitting. Most courses are self-directed, which is a technical way of saying you can work at your own pace, on your own schedule. Some courses are faculty-led — an instructor posts readings, guides discussions with the class and offers detailed, individual feedback about your work.

NewsU also engages participants with strong visuals and animation. The site has bright, modern colors, and the Flash-based animations, simulations and movies have a fresh look that appeals to all age groups.

NewsU training, however, is more than a single-visit experience. Think of it as a training center with an always-open library. Covering Water Quality, a course created in partnership with the Society of Environmental Journalists, not only helps a reporter or editor understand the basics of drinking-water quality, but it also features a research library that can be accessed anytime.

Chip Scanlan's Get Me Rewrite course has several tools that help journalists revise their own work. One tool, The Sentence Tracker, gives reporters a visual view of the length of each sentence in a story. Once you're enrolled in the course, you can come back anytime you're working on a story to use the tools to strengthen your writing.

The depth of content in such a course depends on a key attribute of the NewsU project — its partnerships within the journalism community. While Poynter will offer extensive training on NewsU, success also depends upon developing training alliances with journalism



*Finberg is director of Interactive Learning at The Poynter Institute.*



## What NewsU offers

Here are just some of the courses available at <http://www.newsu.org>:

The Interview, helps with the skills needed for better interviewing. From Poynter's Chip Scanlan.

Lousy Listeners, a must for managers who want to improve their listening skills. From Poynter's Jill Geisler.

The Lead Lab, understanding and writing better leads. From Poynter's Chip Scanlan.

Cleaning Your Copy, helping you with style, grammar and spelling issues that can plague copy before it reaches the desk. From Poynter.

Journalism and Trauma explains traumatic stress in victims and helps you when covering tragedies. From the Dart Center.

Lessons from the 2005 ASNE Community Service Photojournalism Award winners and finalists. With Poynter's Kenny Irby.

Typography for News Design, the basics of type. With Poynter's Sara Quinn.

Covering Water Quality, an online training module from the Society of Environmental Journalists.

The complete collection of writing tools. From Poynter's Roy Peter Clark's *The Writer's Workbench*: 50

### Tools You Can Use.

Freedom of Information, helping you use FOI laws to write stronger stories. From the Society of Professional Journalists.

On the Beat: Crime and Police, from the Criminal Justice Journalists.

Math for Journalists, how to work with figures. From Debbie Wolfe, technology trainer at the St. Petersburg Times.

Got News? An introduction to journalism and news judgment.

Setting up a beat gets easier with Beat Basics and Beyond. With Steve Buttry.

Writing Better Print Headlines, with Kenn Finkel, a faculty-led module.

Reporting Across Cultures, a faculty-led module, with Victor Merina that teaches covering diverse communities.

Plus, there's Be a Reporter game, a fun way to test your journalistic skills.

Courses under development include:

Plagiarism: Combating Journalism's Original Sin

Legal Rights for Broadcasters

Grammar Rules: A Guide for Editors, with ACES

Writing Online Headlines — H.F.

associations, other training groups and individuals.

Current NewsU course partners include the American Society of Newspaper Editors, the Asian American Journalists Association, the Society of Professional Journalists, the Dart Center for Journalism & Trauma, the Online News Association, the Association of Health Care Journalists, ReZnet, the Society of Environmental Journalists and the Criminal Justice Journalists.

Partners for future courses include Investigative Reporters and Editors, the American Copy Editors Society, the National Conference of Editorial Writers, the Education Writers

Association, the Media Bloggers Association and the Casey Center for Journalism. There are also conversations under way with several large newspaper companies to share their training materials via NewsU.

The skeptical journalist might ask, "Does this e-learning stuff work?" Like most training, the more effort you put in, the greater the reward.

Feedback from course participants tells the story. Their report cards put NewsU at the top of the class. Here are some of the responses from NewsU evaluations:

■ 73 percent said their course was useful to extremely useful.

■ 90 percent said they were likely to

participate in another course.

■ 86 percent said half to all of the course content was helpful in their job; 33 percent said all of the content was helpful.

■ 80 percent said they would recommend NewsU to a colleague.

One of the early adopters of NewsU training was Jane Clifford, who is the family editor at The San Diego Union-Tribune. "No matter how long you've been in business, it's never a bad idea to refresh what you think you know, to be reminded of the things that matter, the things we rarely have a chance to think about because we're too busy doing the work," she said. "It was almost like being back in a classroom, briefly, refining the skills to do the job well and continue to improve."

As NewsU heads into 2006, there are several tasks to tackle. First, create more e-learning modules.

The second task is to build awareness of NewsU. Using a combination of print and electronic marketing, NewsU has created an e-learning starter kit for editors. Among the items in the kit:

■ A movie about how e-learning at NewsU works.

■ Brochures and other materials that can be handed out.

■ A poster with NewsU Post-it notes to help journalists remember to visit the site.

Editors or newsroom trainers who want a kit should go to <http://www.newsu.org/getstarted>.

There's always one more question that gets asked of the NewsU crew: What does this cost? Right now, almost all of the courses are free. And that's the plan for many of the self-directed modules. Faculty-led courses have a modest fee because of the level of interaction and feedback from the instructor.

The goal for all courses is to make the training accessible to individuals as well as companies.

Ultimately, NewsU will succeed because journalists will take control of their own training needs and recognize that small investments in time — and money — can make them better at their jobs. ♦