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Great VCU Bike Race Book Faculty Reflections

Great VCU Bike Race Book

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## Crowdsourcing the Worlds

Tim Bajkiewicz

*Virginia Commonwealth University*, [tbajkiewicz@vcu.edu](mailto:tbajkiewicz@vcu.edu)

Jeff South

*Virginia Commonwealth University*, [jcsouth@vcu.edu](mailto:jcsouth@vcu.edu)



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# Crowdsourcing Journalism for the UCI Worlds

- Home
- Students' blogs & Twitters
- Class Announcements
- Assignments
- Resource links
- About/class syllabus
- Instructors
- Our final thoughts

## Our final thoughts

### How we got here

The idea came to us in February while riding the [VCU Campus Connector](#) shuttle bus to the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* building between the Monroe Park and MCV campuses. The [Times-Dispatch](#) editors had invited us because they wanted to discuss hiring some of our journalism students to help cover the [UCI Worlds](#), then seven months away. As the bus rumbled down Franklin Street, Tim and I thought:

*Suppose we offered a course on how to cover the bike race — and how citizen journalists can use cellphones and social media to reveal stories that other news reporters might miss.*

A few months later, when [Vice Provost Gardner Campbell](#) issued a call for bike race-related courses, we jumped on the opportunity. We saw our class as a way to accomplish several goals and serve multiple stakeholders:

- Introduce non-journalism students to basic journalism skills, such as interviewing and newswriting
- Introduce students to the world of bicycle racing
- Teach students how to take photos with a cellphone and how to publish and promote news on [Twitter](#) and other social media platforms
- Help the city's [daily newspaper and Web portal](#) cover the biggest international event ever hosted by Richmond
- Have fun watching the bike races and meeting visitors from all over the world

### What happened in the class

After a few meetings (and several cups of coffee) we approached the learning outcomes – what the student takes away from the course – much like we do for most Robertson School courses. The School prides itself on being an incubator for students to learn and demonstrate professional media skills, like writing and media production. Of course, the UCI Worlds gave us and our students a much bigger “canvas” on which to work. With our very first assignment we established the importance of this being “[connected learning](#),” of being on the open Internet and interactive in a different way than traditional learning, especially by narrating your learning (much like we’re doing here).

- We asked them to create their Rampages WordPress website and to write a bit about who they are, what brought them to the course and how they use social media. We also asked them to get an account on the social media site Twitter.
- The next three assignments were geared (pun intended) toward ramping up their skills so they could complete a reporting-oriented assignment during the race. The first one featured free, online tutorials from the journalism training site [newsu.org](http://newsu.org) about how journalism works, how professionals define what news is (and isn't) and how to generate interest in your story.
- The second skill-oriented assignment focused on using Twitter in a journalistic way. After sharing info about how journalists think about and use that social media platform, we asked them to create a series of Tweets that included photos and links. [This page](#) has all their Twitter accounts.
- The third assignment focused on how to take a better photo, especially with your cell phone camera. Some of our favorites:
  - <http://rampages.us/audrydubon/a-few-of-my-favorite-things/>
  - <http://rampages.us/hannsull/2015/09/26/the-worlds-at-vcu-3/>
  - <http://rampages.us/katieccairns/2015/09/18/a-week-in-the-life-of-a-theatre-major/>
- Finally, the UCI Worlds were here! We asked students to Tweet regarding the race and re-Tweet their student colleagues' work, as well as take and post race-related photos. We also asked them to go to the race and interview a visitor, preferably an international visitor. Some nice Storify's:
  - <http://rampages.us/audrydubon/storify/>
  - <https://storify.com/InSightJMillan/final-thoughts-uci-worlds>
  - <https://storify.com/rodbeego/how-i-spent-my-bike-race-week>
- The final assignment introduced [Storify](#), an online social media aggregation and curation tool, and asked students to create their own integrating their work and others' from the race (could be other students, local media, international media, etc.). We also had them comment on each other's work. Finally, we asked students to reflect on their learning and doing in the course.

## Final thoughts from Jeff

As our course comes to a close, I feel the way the Slovakian cyclist Peter Sagan must have felt when he [won the men's elite road circuit](#) at the Worlds: exhausted but euphoric. Our students accomplished a lot on many levels.

The 10 students who worked for the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* greatly enhanced their portfolios, publishing stories, photos and videos that will boost their job prospects.

Other students got published as well — on the daily digests of the [VCU Great Bike Race Book](#), for example, and on their personal Rampages sites. “I was and still am on cloud nine about it all, mainly because as an aspiring journalist getting published is a huge reassurance that I'm in the right field,” [wrote one student](#), whose work was published by the website of television station WRIC.

Moreover, students learned a lot — about journalism, social media, bicycling and the world (as well as the Worlds). As [one student wrote](#):

Taking this course motivated me to witness the events taking place and I gained a lot appreciation for it all. I learned about all the preparation that went into planning for the race and how huge the bike race actually is in the bicycling community. Not only that, but I got to meet interesting people and be a part of history. All in all, I'm really glad VCU decided to use the UCI Championships as a learning opportunity for students.

## Final thoughts from Tim

I am constantly amazed at what someone can produce when you guide them a little and then get out of the way. That's what I see happened here and I couldn't be happier with the outcomes. Education is empowerment. Students thought about, and did some work in, media, which I would argue is one of the most powerful social

and cultural forces at work today. It follows, then, that empowering them about media provides tools and perspectives on how to better navigate modern life.

Let me get deep for a minute. I've spent a lot of time studying and integrating the theories and work of Russian child psychologist Lev Vygotsky into my academic work and life. [One website](#) explains:

According to Vygotsky, until children learn to use mental tools, their learning is largely controlled by the environment; they attend only to the things that are brightest or loudest, and they can remember something only if has been repeated many times. AFTER children master mental tools, they become in charge of their own learning, by attending and remembering in an intentional and purposeful way.

Too much of contemporary education seems too bright, too loud and too repetitive. I was pleased that Jeff and I could craft an approach that, I believe, motivates students to engage (and even play!) with media, all while learning about it and its impact. This ties into my second deep point: From our first conversations Jeff and I agreed that this was, at its heart, about news and [media literacy](#). Although their definitions are broad, they're about being critical consumers, and producers, of news content and media.

Many of our students are [mass communication](#) students, but we were excited to see students from across VCU. It's my hope that, no matter their major, after our course students think about and use media differently, deliberately and critically. As one student put it:

This class embraced the media aspects and taught us how that, in the changing world, it can work in a positive way.

Finally, when you read a final comment from a student like this next one, you can't help but know it all worked out:

Seeing my work online and having this experience was easily one of the best things that's ever happened to me. I mean who else can say an international bike race of an olympic scale just happened to take place in their city (backyard for that matter) and that they got to photograph for hundreds of thousands of people to see?

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