

Academic Ethics

Jeff Pugh and William Edgar

Lately, much has been said about “Journalistic Accuracy”. On the evening news, a veteran war correspondent recently recanted and issued apologies for embellishing one of his stories.¹ He was later suspended from his role as news anchor. And this is not an isolated event. In fact, inaccuracy in news reporting is becoming a news story itself.² The sketch comedy and variety show ‘Saturday Night Live’ lampoons the rampant errors in reporting in a major network news show who’s tagline is, ironically, ‘Fair & Balanced’.³ In his excellent article, [Sez who? LION joins call for accuracy, attribution](#)⁴, Dylan Smith writes:

“Reporters do a lot of things to earn their keep: interview public figures, comb through the fine print of public records, attend community events, hunt for stray commas, work to offer comprehensive background on the tough questions we face together.

But what we get paid for is something that should never be questioned, never be for sale.

Trust.

The foundation of journalism is the trust between reporter and reader.”

In accordance with this goal, the Society of Professional Journalists has elevated accountability and transparency to the status of core values in the latest update in their “Code of Ethics”.⁵ The National Association of Educators has a similar “Code of Ethics”⁶ that applies to professional educators. While the NEA’s Code is geared toward synchronous education, several specific points in the guiding Principles have direct application to continuing education for license renewal.

¹ <http://www.stripes.com/news/us/nbc-s-brian-williams-recants-iraq-story-after-soldiers-protest-1.327792>

² <http://money.cnn.com/2015/01/18/media/fox-apologizes-for-anti-islam-comments/>

³ <http://www.adweek.com/tvnewser/the-errors-of-fox-friends-lampooned-by-snl-weekend-update-thursday/147851>

⁴ http://www.lionpublishers.com/news/report/041113_plagiarism/

⁵ <http://www.spj.org/ethicscode.asp>

⁶ https://www.nea.org/assets/docs/Code_of_Ethics_of_the_Education_Profession_2015_NEA_Handbook.pdf

CEU Plan is also bound by a “Code of Ethics”, but we are equally concerned with “Academic Ethics”. Every course enrollment is a contract between CEU Plan and the individual student. The student is bound to adhere to our policies (as detailed under the “About” menu item on our website)⁷ and we are bound to provide course content approved by their specific State Operator Certification Program (OCP) for the renewal of their specific license type and to report their course completions to the relevant OCP for their credit. There is also an agreement between CEU Plan and the individual State’s OCP. This agreement requires that CEU Plan courses are relevant to water and/or wastewater to which they are applied and that the State OCP will grant CEU credit for the successful completion of the course.

There are three main aspects of any education transfer: Content, Delivery, and Management. That is, what is being taught?, how is it being taught?, and how do we know that it is being retained? All three of these questions must be answered satisfactorily if we are to have faith that the education is effective. In water and wastewater treatment (and associated disciplines), the content of our courses is consistent with the rules written by the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the management of this content conforms to the rules and regulations imposed by the International Association for Continuing Education and Training (IACET). The IACET Standard is approved by the American National Standards Institute (ANSI). CEU Plan is an ANSI/IACET Authorized Provider (AP) of Continuing Education Units (CEUs). Periodically, we undergo a review of our policies and practices to assure that we maintain compliance in both of these categories (all three of these categories if one includes the delivery – online dissemination – which also undergoes even more routine scrutiny to see if we can improve our practices). It is incredibly important that there are no errors or mistakes in the content of the course. We have identified three main potential sources of errors in the content of the course: errors in the facts, figures and math in the course; errors in obtaining permission or attribution of non-original content; and spelling and grammatical errors.

As we prepare a course for publication (‘activation’ is the term used for online publication), we scrutinize the course and perform a three-tier beta testing and “fact-check” of the content (the author/instructor of the course has already performed the first-line fact checking while writing the course). When a text-based course is finalized, it goes to the editor who checks it for grammar, punctuation, and overall style. While this final pre-production editing technically does not cover the course content, the editor works with others in the Production Department to make corrections as necessary. If any aspect of the course does not seem exactly correct,

⁷ <https://www.ceuplan.com/States.aspx>

the author is expected to defend it. After the editor, the course is encoded and uploaded to the servers. Video-based courses undergo similar level of scrutiny before the clip is rendered, encoded, and uploaded to our media cloud servers. After the course has been finished and is posted, it is beta-tested before it is activated. Beta-testers are expected to flag any questionable content. The course is not released into the various state catalogs until it has been approved by the Program Administration and specific state OCPs.

We use a number of 'punch-lists' as we go through the production process to make sure that we prepare the necessary Course Description, Course Itinerary, and Learning Objectives (as required by ANSI/IACET) and the Instructor *Curriculum Vitae* and other advertising material in a timely fashion. Check-lists have long been customary of professionals in many other fields (read medical doctors, law enforcement, military, construction, etc.). Craig Silverman (a journalism guru and author of several books and articles on journalistic ethics) even notes that veteran pilot US Airways pilot Chesley Sullenberger used a checklist in his 2009 emergency landing in the Hudson River.⁸ As part of the vetting procedure, CEU Plan will create a check-list of examples and work each problem set to assure that the math is correct (it is way too easy to misplace a decimal point, skip a step, or forget a term). We have found that the implementation of a separate check-list for making sure that we have the necessary permissions to use images or descriptions (especially with the proliferation of video-based courses) is in order and helps us organize the necessary documentation associated with producing a course and working within the US Copyright Rules and Regulations (US PTO).⁹

We are proud of the quality of CEU Plan courses. We feel that we have succeeded in creating a quality program bringing quality continuing education to the water and wastewater industry and stand behind our courses. The use of course production check-lists is one more assurance that CEU Plan courses provide the most accurate information possible.

⁸ <http://www.slideshare.net/stevebuttry/craig-silverman-slides>

⁹ <http://copyright.gov/title37/>