

THE REALITY OF TEACHING RADIO

By Stephen Winzenburg

A recent article in R&R entitled “Cash for Class” (December 12) claimed that radio professionals can make easy extra money by becoming part-time college instructors. Take it from a broadcaster who has also spent 25 years as a professor at four colleges: teaching radio is a lot more difficult than doing radio.

Becoming an adjunct professor can be difficult for the type of people attracted to the radio profession. Instead of sitting alone in a studio speaking to a perceived adoring listening audience, you stand vulnerable in front of skeptical sleepyheads who rarely consider radio an equal to other media. Most don't listen much to broadcast radio and the only air talent they seem to be interested in are those they have seen on TV, like syndicated host Ryan Seacrest or satellite star Howard Stern.

Students often sign up for radio thinking it's a fun blow-off class and are expecting you to entertain them. But a professor also has to set classroom guidelines that reflect the real world of radio, such as requiring that students turn in work on time and follow FCC rules. Instructors can end up being seen as the bad guys, which means you have to go into teaching for more than just an ego boost.

Here are nine tips for those who are interested in joining the academic world for the right reasons:

1. Gain knowledge about the entire radio business. Working for two stations or even ten stations doesn't make you an expert on the other 14,000 out there. You need to be able to teach about jobs you have never personally performed and formats you have never worked in.
2. Uphold professional standards. Require that classroom projects follow commercial radio rules and then get ready to deal with objections from students. Young people raised on HBO, satellite radio and YouTube have no concept of why they can't use the F word or why they can't play an uncensored song. Then when given a bad grade, they want to fight it as a First Amendment case.
3. Have thick skin. Students often don't believe professors, even those with years of professional experience. One student earned a bad grade after failing to show up for his air shift and turning in a spot that ran 42 seconds. When he stormed into my office to try to get me to change the grade and I explained the need for timeliness in radio, he responded, “Well, that's your opinion.”
4. Be prepared to use older equipment. College computers may be loaded with dated, inexpensive software. And the school's only production room may become a battleground when twenty students try to complete projects on the same day.
5. Don't assume all students are technically savvy. Just because a young person can whip through a Blackberry doesn't mean he can run radio equipment. I would even argue that today's technology has made students less creative in producing broadcast material. They are, however, more willing to click on anything on a

computer without fear, which means that they often unintentionally sabotage the audio system by deleting things or changing settings.

6. Know communication law and FCC rules. These often unruly students are for some reason fascinated by legal issues. Use case studies of shows that were fined by the FCC. Young people love to discuss what they can and can't get away with.
7. Keep up on what students listen to and talk about, but don't pretend you are one of them. Study the music charts, search YouTube, watch MTV, read the tabloids. Know more about their generation's media habits than they do. But no matter how young you think you are, they'll respect you more for understanding them than for trying to act like one of them.
8. Earn a graduate degree in broadcasting or communications. At many four-year colleges in America you can't teach (even part-time) unless you have at least a master's degree. And quickie Internet diplomas don't count.
9. Have realistic expectations about college pay. Adjunct teachers may earn \$150 to \$200 a week for a three- or four-hour class, which sounds like you're earning \$50 an hour. But when you figure in up to ten hours a week of preparation, paperwork and grading, the actual pay rate is more like \$10 an hour!

I lined up a media professional with a master's degree to teach a class and he said he was happy to work it into his schedule because he really wanted to share his life experiences with students. But when he later found out the pay rate he emailed that he was no longer interested because he didn't think it was worth his time.

Another broadcaster that I hired to teach one class was excited to break away from his normal day-to-day corporate production job and work with young people. After the third class period this 32-year-old emailed me that he was already exhausted, shocked by the apathy of today's college crowd. He said over half of the class failed to turn in the first project on time and many weren't showing up at all for demonstrations.

So why would anyone want to become an instructor? Because when you do get through to those who take their education seriously, you get an amazing sense of fulfillment. The standout students will practice every suggestion you make, show dramatic changes throughout the semester and go on to work the part-time radio jobs that no one else wants for the chance to work their way up.

Then as they become successful they will come back to ask for your advice and thank you for how well you prepared them for the real world. In the end, long-term college teachers find that it's worth putting up with the difficulties in order to experience the rewards of building into the lives of those who go on to make it in the radio business.

Stephen Winzenburg, a former talk show host for WHO radio in Des Moines, is a communication professor at Grand View University in Des Moines where he manages two campus radio stations and produces the all-weekend "Kids Radio Mania" programming.