

Share your experiences with students

A classroom visit gives students a newsroom perspective.

As many professionals do, regardless of occupation, I receive my share of invitations to speak at school career days.

And let me tell you, I go out of my way to accept every offer.

Due to the hectic pace of our job and meeting deadlines, I know the opportunities we have to educate people, of all ages, about our work are few.

Classroom visits are an excellent way to teach students about journalism and the important role it plays in their everyday lives, as well as the world outside their particular school, state and country.

I try to speak to students of all ages whenever I can.

It has been said that the public has a distrust of the media. If that is indeed true, the only way to change the status quo is to educate the public. And what better way is there than to start with curious youngsters? After all, they will be (or already are) the next generation of our readers.

As professional journalists, we can become teachers and role models who children can look up to and learn from. This could also help bring young talent into the industry.

Every time I visit a classroom, I'm amazed at the amount of interest and curiosity kids have about the media. I've spoken to journalism classes at Boston University, career days at various high

schools, and most recently, a newspaper club at a middle school in Lincoln, Mass.

The sixth-, seventh- and eighth-graders had plenty of questions, and naturally not much knowledge about the newsgathering process. I was almost caught off guard, not sure of how much detail to go into about reporting, such as the Freedom of Information Act. I touched on those subjects as they listened patiently in their seats, trying to learn what they could to publish their two-page, photocopied newspaper.

In hindsight, I wish I had brought more solid story ideas for them to follow up on at their middle school. Nevertheless, it went well. It proved to be a learning experience for me, and

I felt rejuvenated after I walked out of the classroom, jumped in my car and drove back to the office to file a story.

I encourage all SPJ members to take advantage of speaking opportunities at schools. Kids wonder who writes the stuff in the newspaper, and you can explain it to them from your personal experience.

Show young people how journalists work, and why we do what we do. The classroom is a perfect place for you to make a difference in kids' education. It's also a great break from your day-to-day grind of pounding out stories, and you can leave the classroom with a fresh perspective.

Here are some tips to follow when you speak to students:

1. Bring freebies. For high school and college classes, I give each student copies of The Boston Globe, my business cards and

handouts I've written up on landing internships and starting a career in journalism.

When speaking to the kids in grade school, I gave out reporters' notebooks, which seemed to be a hit with the kids. The next time I visit a class, I plan to give out Globe pens, too.

2. Find out how long you have to talk.

Time is everything; knowing how much you have is key to having a successful classroom visit. Be sure leave at least five minutes at the end for questions.

3. Find out what the teacher wants you to cover.

Does the teacher want you to talk about your daily work as a reporter? Or perhaps how you cover their town's local government and politics? Or maybe how students can get a job after graduating college? Talk to the teacher before you arrive and try to narrow the topics. That way, you can tailor your talk to meet the teacher's goals.

4. Outline your lecture. It's easy to stray away from important topics by dwelling on an anecdote, especially when the kids have a lot of questions about a particular story. Always answer their questions, just be sure to consistently reinforce what you're trying to teach them, and be ready to get everyone back on track after an impromptu Q&A session. I have found that typing up an outline to use as a reference is helpful.

Emily Sweeney is a staff reporter at The Boston Globe. She can be reached at esweeney@globe.com.



EMILY SWEENEY