

September 23, 2002

To: National Advisory Board
From: Jim Naughton

Your challenge, should you accept it, is to teach “sequencing” -- the way a story should unfold to have the desired effect on readers – to a bunch of beat reporters and editors. Stumped? Me, too. I could probably fudge my way through a discussion, but not with the kind of imagination and verve Tom French had. Tom dazzled me during a recent seminar by:

- Reprinting an email in which his 10-year-old son, Sam, explained a black eye: “nat + hockey stick + momentum + my eye + ow.”
- Showing two clips from the film, “Sling Blade,” in the first of which Billy Bob Thornton’s character, a retarded ex-con, hears a good old boy tell an off-color joke, and in the second of which Billy Bob mangles the joke by screwing up the sequence.
- Demonstrating how Monet’s paintings of the Cathedral at Rouen, haystacks, and Monet’s wife, Camille, reflected understanding of the sequence of daylight.



It wasn’t merely that I sat in the back of the room in awe of Tom French’s ability to explain what he calls “narrative DNA.” I kept thinking how extraordinary such a performance would be if made available to thousands of aspiring writers who couldn’t or didn’t get to attend a Poynter seminar.

Yes, I’m becoming a convert to e-Learning.

At the most recent meeting of Poynter's Board of Trustees, Dean Karen Dunlap detailed what the faculty is doing to explore distance learning. Our approach is apt to be significantly different from what API and others have done – less structured, more self-guided – and it could be a resource for specialized journalism groups and minority journalist organizations whose purposes are allied with ours.

That's part of why the folks at the Knight Foundation practically leaped into the air (Degas' ballet dancers come to mind, since we're being artistic) when approached on this topic.

I emailed Hodding Carter to inquire if Knight might have an interest in collaborating with us on e-Learning. It could not have been much more than a minute before he responded that the suggestion "comes at a good time," said Knight was attempting to "work through a more integrated and strategic (to use philanthropy's favorite bullshit word) approach to our hydra-headed training ventures," and complimented us:

As a general statement, I like the idea of teaming with Poynter. You folks continue to set the standard in a number of areas that matter to us. As someone at the Johnson Foundation told me (all too wisely) when I was seeking wisdom about running a foundation back in 1988, it's easier to talk about foundation cooperation than it is to effect. But I bet we could rise above inertial territoriality and do the right thing if we set our mind to it.

Eric Newton of Knight followed with an email saying they had been "thinking about Poynter as perfect" to collaborate on what they call "News University." *News U*. Has a certain ring to it.

As a Poynter visiting scholar, Howard Finberg has guided a faculty task force in considering e-learning. He's drafted a report outlining our next steps and providing a focus for our discussions with the Knight Foundation. We'll see where this palaver goes, but there is no mistaking the potential in the combination of Knight resources and Poynter teaching.

Poynter.

