

Using digital tools in WIL to enable student journalists' real world learning

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This paper explores how student journalists' adoption of digital technology, during real world work-integrated learning (WIL) reporting projects, enabled authentic learning. Student journalists at a regional Queensland university interviewed the candidates for each of the four-yearly local government area elections, from 2008 to 2016, in Australia's second largest inland city and its surrounds. They published their multimedia stories on the *Radio Journalism Online* blog. This study considers the importance, when framing WIL projects for student journalists, of embracing the traditional and new technical skills and digital literacies that graduates will need to be job ready for multimedia newsrooms. It also considers the impact of recording and telling stories in the talents' or actors' own words on the students' perceptions of the accuracy and reliability of their election reports.

Keywords: digital technology; multimedia; journalism education; work-integrated learning

Introduction

Local government is a vital source of information for Australia's news media, particularly in regional areas. More than 570 local councils serve a diverse range of communities and spend about \$32 billion each year to provide a broad range of infrastructure, economic and community services to residents (ALGA, 2016). A local council news round can be a stepping stone to becoming a state or federal political reporter (Lamble, 2013). For inexperienced journalists, however, reporting on local government can be a daunting task. Ideally, university undergraduate and postgraduate program courses on council reporting would be aimed at equipping student journalists with the knowledge and skills required for best practice in the digital age. They should include information on the procedures and protocols of the level of government that is closest to the people because most council news stories centre on direct reporting of the debates and decisions that happen during council meetings, or on issues that affect ratepayers (Sissons, 2006).

Student journalists preparing to enter the highly contested, tight job market in Australia (Christensen, 2012) need a competitive edge and the knowledge and skills to enable "a smooth transition from university into the world of work" (Wolfe, 2014, p. 38). Requisite core skills include research, writing, grammar, technical competency in digital and social media and video, communication and teamwork skills (Cullen, 2015) and, increasingly, experiential learning (Wolfe, 2014). Clearly, there is an onus on academic institutions to help students to make the transition. However, few case studies exist that illustrate innovative ways to insert student media experiences into the journalism curriculum (Royal, 2015). A perceived need to support students' development of the skills associated with entry-level journalists in the contemporary digital environment drove the work-integrated learning (WIL) projects that are the focus of this study. The four-yearly Queensland local government elections, in particular the Toowoomba Regional Council (TRC) polls, provided the chance for student journalists from the University of Southern Queensland (USQ) to cover this facet of local democracy – and, thus, practise digital newsgathering and multimedia reporting and writing skills outside the classroom.

Literature review

Since the mid-1990s, studies in the United States have explored issues surrounding media industry changes and their impact on tertiary journalism education. In Australia, research into convergent journalism curricula has looked at the implementation of skills in blogging and podcasting, as well as the introduction of convergent concepts in a newsroom setting (Cullen et al., 2014). There is broad agreement that convergent skills in the curriculum should be "pegged to industry demands and adopted without compromising basic journalism competencies" (2014, p. 3). Royal (2015, p. 22) has noted how web and social media tools provide a "larger news hole" for more extensive coverage of events. Hyperlinks designate which sources should be given public attention and to what degree – a function "that maps onto journalistic values well" because "links can help reinforce a report's facticity by connecting readers directly with sources and showing readers how journalists

know what they know” (Coddington, 2014, p. 141). Blogs offer efficient and cost-effective ways to engage students, allow them to publish their work and provide a permanent archive of their activities (Royal, 2015). Both the news media and local government are “central to a healthy democracy, but the relationship is not always an easy one” (Waller & Hess, 2014, p. 246). The news media, as part of its celebrated fourth estate function, is said to play an important watchdog role in keeping local government accountable. At the same time, shrinking newsrooms and changed commercial imperatives pose a threat to local democracy because local politicians are not being held to account; voters are not being given a range of views; and voters are deprived of information they require to make judgments when voting in elections (Ramsay & Moore, 2016). While the local newspaper remains the main source of council election news and information, a substantial number of voters have shown they are willing to bypass the local mainstream media (Jones & Feldman, 2006). Their preferred, alternative sources of political information include the Internet. Voters who perceive bias in council election coverage said that the local news media fails to provide enough information to allow them to make informed choices (Jones, 2011). The same voters said the local news media has no influence on their vote. The perceived lack of diversity of news and views available to voters was another catalyst for the successive TRC local council election reporting projects that I designed and developed as WIL opportunities for my student journalists.

The idea that people learn by doing is more than 2000 years old and is embodied in this proverb attributed to the Confucian philosopher, Xunzi: “I hear and I forget; I see and I remember; I do and I understand” (Newton, 2013). Much later, the American philosopher John Dewey argued that the only adequate training for occupations was by engaging in the occupations themselves (Forde & Meadows, 2011). He said: “Nothing takes root in the mind when there is no balance between doing and receiving” (Furlan, 2007, p. 124). As the demand for graduates to be work-ready has grown in recent years, WIL has proliferated in Australian universities. The integration of work and tertiary study is seen as a means of improving work readiness (McNamara et al., 2011). Increasing numbers of students are being “placed in ‘real world’ workplace situations for credit towards their degrees” (Stewart et al., 2010, p. 60). WIL is not simply work experience, however, although it can include this as an element. Billett (2008, cited in Stewart et al., 2010, p. 60) said WIL is a much more structured consideration of the “relational interdependence between the affordance of the workplace and the engagement of workers”, placing an emphasis on the processes involved in learning in a workplace setting and enhancing opportunities for them to occur. Forde and Meadows (2010) wrote that early research on journalism students’ experiences of WIL suggests that they learn as much about themselves as they do about the media industry in which they undertake an internship or placement. The same writers have also identified the importance of maintaining an active relationship between stakeholders – producers (that is, the student journalists), media industries and education institutions – in terms of curriculum design and students’ personal development (Forde & Meadows, 2010; Stewart et al., 2010).

The TRC projects undertaken from 2008 to 2016 aimed to model professional, quality journalism in coverage of the local government news round, specifically the council elections; to provide opportunities for WIL; and to generate authentic learning outcomes for the students, such as portfolios of published cross-platform work, produced by technology-savvy personnel and valued by employers (Jones, 2005; Furlan, 2007). Elements of these projects resonate with features of best-practice WIL scenarios (McIlveen et al., 2008). They include:

- Linking theory and practice, underpinned with appropriate professional knowledge and reflective practice
- Providing identifiable learning in a work environment, which enhances on-campus programs and courses, and which can be assessed
- The objectives of such placements meeting the needs of students, university courses and the workplace
- Skills that may be discipline specific and/or globally transferable, and that are relevant to lifelong learning requirements, such as critical thinking, written and oral communication, teamwork, problem-solving, managing and organising.

The method employed by these projects is case study. I have assessed the projects with the following questions:

- What were the student journalists’ impressions of their real-world learning?
- To what extent did the student journalists feel prepared for work in a contemporary digital environment?

The TRC projects, 2008 to 2016

Since 2008, on-campus student journalists in the undergraduate Bachelor of Mass Communication, Bachelor of Communication or Bachelor of Arts at USQ, in Toowoomba, have come together to report on the candidates running in the TRC elections. More than 20 students have now reported for these projects. In 2008 and 2012, all of the students were enrolled in *Radio Journalism*, and so had working knowledge of digital audio recorders and “Audacity” editing software. The course offerings originally coincided with the Queensland local government elections in March. In 2016, *Radio Journalism* had moved to second semester, and the team’s make-up was quite different. It comprised first and second year students yet to study *Radio Journalism*, and three, third year students who had completed the course. As a result, “Team 2016” contained several student reporters with little expertise in print and none in radio or audio journalism.

A fortnight before our publication deadline, I held a series of intensive workshops to cater for these disparate backgrounds and to ensure that all students achieved a minimum standard of expertise (Furlan, 2007). The students were immersed in the techniques of online research using social networking sites (Facebook), broadcast interviewing and digital audio recording, both in the field and over the telephone, as well as digital audio editing, broadcast reporting and writing conventions and story structure. They were given examples of scripts from previous online stories. To help the student journalists to achieve professional competence, they experienced the process of election news production and publication through simulated news desks (Hodgson & Wong, 2011). A WordPress blog was selected to “promote interactions between peers, echoing authentic newsroom experiences where students complete tasks while receiving meaningful feedback on their actions” (2011, p. 198). As a result, they could reflect on and adapt their actions accordingly. This is a useful tool for teaching students about audio and online journalism. News stories posted by subscribing authors can be published instantly, in reverse chronological order, and with easy navigation and audio replay capability for the target audience. Some of the students had already completed a second-year print reporting course about the local government round, but none of the team had previously covered an election. I briefed them on the 2016 project’s antecedents, with their beginnings in my “Local media, local democracy” research projects that interrogated voters’ sources of election information (Jones & Feldman, 2006) and candidates’ use of media in election campaigns (Jones, 2011). To help the students develop subject expertise in the processes of a local government election, and because “it helps to know something about the news you’re reporting” (Newton, 2013, p. 1), I utilised resources from my course on specialty reporting. I described the purpose of rounds coverage and elections reporting, stressing the need for voters to have access to a variety of information about the candidates and their policies. These meetings also helped to frame the rules for the day-to-day running of the project.

Another feature that sets “Team 2016” apart from previous years was the participation of industry, on two different levels: first, in the production of the stories for publication online on our blog site; and second, in the dissemination of those stories on an additional platform – their broadcast in prime time on a top rating, local commercial radio station. With three levels of experience in the eight-person reporting team, the “seasoned” third years, or senior student reporters, were on hand to mentor their less experienced colleagues. In addition, I engaged two industry professionals, echoing Newton’s (2013) concept of a clinic in the “teaching hospital” model for journalism education where students gain practical experience as an integral part of their education, and students, teachers and professionals work together for the benefit of the community. This also replicates the realistic conditions of a working newsroom (Furlan 2007): one professional oversaw the student reporters and the assignment of interviewees (the role of Chief of Staff or CoS), and the second professional (the technical producer) ensured quality control of the audio recordings and online content. The CoS was a former ABC journalist who, coincidentally, was one of the original student journalists on the 2008 project. A USQ Media Services producer ran the audio recording and editing workshops and managed all technical production.

We set up our newsroom in the USQ journalism laboratory and the adjacent radio studio. Our first full “Team 2016” editorial meeting started with a reminder to the student journalists of the media’s role in “initiating conversations about civic affairs among publics” (Waller & Hess, 2014, p. 246). The team refined the focus of its election coverage and, led by the CoS, the reporters decided to ask each candidate the same key questions. They settled on issues and topics of interest to young, first-time voters and to the broader community. The CoS and I assigned the candidates to the reporters who then began their research, and arranged interview times and locations. In the newsroom, as interviews were completed, grabs selected and stories written, submitted and subbed, the running log on the whiteboard showed our progress towards deadline. Just two weeks after the students received their reporting assignments, we went live on [Radio Journalism Online](#) with their stories about the mayoral and councillor candidates. In the next fortnight, every story was also broadcast on Toowoomba’s leading commercial radio station, 4GR. By election eve, the blog had more than 11,200 views and an industry survey showed a listening audience of 60,000 for the students’ interviews (G. Healy, 4GR, pers. comm., 2016).

Digital technologies: Their contribution to students' learning

The students' work was not evaluated. These WIL projects were not housed within a formal course in the USQ undergraduate journalism major and, thus, were not treated as items of assessment. The students did reflect on their experiences, however, in personal communication to me and in post-project interviews and published journalistic writing. Their impressions confirm my belief, and that of writers such as Tanner, Green and Burns (2012, p. 123), that journalism education is "best taught in a hands-on environment". The students recognised that using digital technology allowed them to undertake various phases of online research, writing and publication, from producing contextual reporting via the technological affordance of hyperlinking, to publishing audio (with professional oversight and to high industry standards) and self-promoting their work on social media. "Not sure who to vote for in the Toowoomba Regional Council election on March 19? Find a brief overview of each candidate here," said one student's Facebook post. The impact on the students' practice and their perceptions of job readiness is summarised in these comments:

I pretty much had no knowledge of digital editing or digital recording devices when I started this project. My competency went from 0 to 6 or 7, so now I am basically familiar with those types of technologies and I have a starting point to learn about new software. If you look at journalism job descriptions, for a lot of them the applicants have to be comfortable using software, social media and online tools. You have to be able to use the new technology or you just get left behind.

To have the experience of using the digital technology, a purpose for using the software, putting it all together for an outcome, and to receive feedback from professionals in the field – you can see what they are doing, take that in and apply it next time you are in a similar situation. Working on the election project gave us real experience to conduct interviews, use audio recording technology and work as a team toward a deadline ... You learn more from experience than you can in a classroom.

The project was a crash-course in real-world neutrality in doing journalism. There was conscious knowledge of the listener who wants facts with no bias or spin while I was recording interviews and putting together the final product. Because the audio needed to be of a professional standard, through the project I learnt more awareness of [the impact of] my surroundings on audio quality.

WIL offers more than opportunities for student journalists to engage in learning situations in the real world. Stewart et al. (2010) wrote that focusing on the nature and effectiveness of WIL goes well beyond simple work experience or work placements, because "it necessitates the identification and application of specific teaching and learning goals and outcomes" (Forde & Meadows, 2010, n.p.). The students' work products (their stories) provided a healthy flow of fact-based news for the local community (Newton, 2013). One student also observed that the project demonstrated to potential employers the quality of the audio obtained, decision-making regarding the audio grabs selected, the news value of chosen angles and the ability to interview a diverse group of people. "I would probably never do an interview now without recording it," he said. "You can go back over the interview when you write the story, to verify the accuracy of information for legal and ethical reasons."

The students' stories were published and broadcast as a direct result of industry partnerships in this intensive teaching mode experience. In line with Newton's (2013) concept of a journalism education clinic, the involvement of industry mentors from the beginning, in the production and in the editorial stages of each story, gave the students the real-world experience of collaborating with professionals, and one that is "not necessarily guaranteed in a standard journalism internship" (Stewart et al., 2010, p. 65). They said:

It was really good to have levels of mentoring ... that encouraged us the entire way, giving advice or help when we needed it. It was also great that they trusted us to do the job properly and on-time. This project was yet another jump in understanding team work in the profession of journalism.

Being able to capture fantastic quotes and add life to a story while ensuring accuracy in quoting sources is a very practical skill to develop in a real world scenario. The entire process, from recording, to editing and uploading, was a great learning experience that did challenge me, though knowing there was a support network to help, coach and guide participants through any difficulties was reassuring.

Conclusion

These election reporting projects have given the student journalists the opportunity to see how the theory they have learned translates into the practical world, by bringing the practical world to their campus. The projects not only provided access to the experience of WIL, they ensured it was meaningful by providing high quality supervision in the one workplace and reducing the potential for inequities in WIL experiences between students (Patrick et al., 2008). The students developed new skills and fluency with digital technology and social media tools to make them more versatile and a greater asset to a newsroom. They improved their pre-existing levels of technical and digital competency through immersion in the daily routines of a converged newsroom, enabling a standard of workplace learning that cannot be assured in professional industry placements (Cullen, 2015). The students also have a permanent archive of their digital literacy. Tanner et al. (2012) have argued that experiential learning must be included as a core component of journalism programs. Broadcasting and publishing online the USQ students' reportage in these WIL projects both developed and showcased their multimedia reporting, newswriting and production skills. Those stories enhanced their university's outreach "by providing professional quality news to the local community that otherwise would not have been covered by declining mainstream outlets" (Freedman & Poulson, 2015, p. 188). With three successful service learning projects completed, each has reinforced my view that journalism educators must try to infuse their courses, or independent projects, with WIL opportunities and outcomes as a way of better preparing their students as entry-level journalists.

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