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Getting the story right: evaluating a postgraduate multimedia journalism module.

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Getting the story right: evaluating a postgraduate multimedia journalism module

The module *Multimedia Journalism* was first designed and delivered in Spring semester 2011. A major redesign was not foreseen because the module was relatively new, and had seemed generally to work well. However, the rapid changes – technological, editorial, and economic - currently underway in journalism (Hesmondhalgh, 2007; Beckett, 2008; Shirky 2008; Albertazzi and Copley, 2009; Williams, 2011) meant that there was an argument for frequent examination of course materials to see that they remained as relevant as possible. In terms of Toohey's Course Design Process, the module was at the latter part of Stage 6, 'evaluate and adjust components as necessary.' (1999:21).

Context

The cohort, made up principally of non-UK students, could be viewed as comprising the following groups: those who wish to become professional journalists; those (sometimes from other courses) who wish to learn more - for academic, professional, or personal reasons - about the way in which the news is reported; those who have already spent some time working as journalists, and who wished to improve their academic qualifications and professional techniques. From a wider perspective, journalism education is becoming increasingly important because employers themselves offer less and less training. Although their study is now ten years old, and related principally to undergraduate education, there are elements here of Barnett et al's idea of 'traditional and emerging curricula' (2001:437), where the latter needs to contain elements such as 'knowing how' and 'applied' as opposed to 'knowing that' and 'pure'. Employers are more likely to expect new employees to come to them with many of the skills they will require as professional journalists.

Rationale

The aim of this project was to ensure that the module answered as closely as possible the demands of that changing world of professional journalism. Of the five approaches to university and college courses which Toohey identifies (1999:48) it was my plan to draw principally on what she calls 'performance- or systems-based' and 'personal relevance/ experiential' while including cognitive elements too. I see the latter as part of the reason why a student would choose to study journalism at a university rather than just take a practical course. Evaluation of the module's

group discussions and projects also drew on Twigg's ideas of 'continuous assessment and feedback' and 'increased interaction among students' (2004:74).

Discussion

From the outset, there were two guiding questions, considered below:

1. How well did the course content work the first time, and what can be done to solve problems which arose?
2. What changes in professional practice in the last twelve months need to be reflected in the module as delivered this academic year?

Throughout the revision process, I drew on elements of the three approaches - among the five listed by Toohey in *Designing Courses for Higher Education* (1999) which I found most relevant to my particular project: performance or systems-based; cognitive; and experiential. While I heeded Toohey's warning about 'the higher education curriculum which espouses a broad range of goals but failed to deliver,' (1999:67), I was also inspired by her idea that, 'Problem-based curricula usually place a high value on experiential learning alongside a cognitivist emphasis on the development of intellectual abilities.' (1999:67). In the sense that this module's purpose was to get students to develop practice which would take them from an idea to a finished news item, I would argue that it could be considered 'problem-based'.

How well did the course content work the first time, and what can be done to solve problems which arose?

The first learning outcome of the module is to, 'Learn how to produce news stories in a range of multimedia contexts, including how to publish and produce online.' My purpose in designing the sessions was to reflect as closely as possible the professional environment in which I had been working until less than a year before. On the subject of advice for course design, Toohey writes of the range of people 'whose input and advice can be extremely useful.' (1999:31). She continues, 'These include educational specialists, leaders at the cutting edge of the discipline, representatives of professional associations, students, and graduates.' (1999:31). In this respect, this module represented both an opportunity, and a challenge. It was an opportunity because, in effect, I had a blank canvas. While some authors such as Bull (2010) have made important contributions to multimedia journalism as an academic discipline, his approach tells us much about the challenges of trying to define such rapidly developing practice at any one time. 'Multimedia journalism: a practical guide isn't just the book in your hands – it's a website too, featuring tons of audio, visual, and textual material.' (2010:viii). I understood Bull's decision to have a website as well as a book to have been taken on the basis that no book could hope to remain up to date. This idea that practice was constantly evolving was key to my approach. The progress which the cohort made suggested that the course content had been well chosen. Each student came to understand the basic demands of reporting in a multiplatform media world, and many seemed to enjoy doing so. 'Excellent lectures and guidelines,'; 'the actual practical projects were the most valuable to my education'; and 'the practical exercises of going out with cameras, microphones, and video

cameras. Great Practice!’ were among the more rewarding comments received in student feedback. One thing which worked less well, and which was commented on by a small number of students in their feedback, was the fact that some sessions were probably too ambitious in the amount of ground they tried to cover. Accordingly, the sessions in question were simplified.

What changes in professional practice in the last twelve months need to be reflected in the module as delivered this academic year?

2011 was one of the biggest years for international news since 2001, the year of the attacks on the United States. Almost without exception, a major news event has consequences for journalistic practice. The Second World War saw radio become the most influential medium. The Vietnam War was the first war seen so extensively on television (Hallin, 1989:105), and the Iraq war of 1991 is now generally seen as the first war on *live* television (Thussu, 2003:118). 2011 was the year of the Arab uprisings, the crisis in the Eurozone, the killing of Osama bin Laden, the Japanese tsunami, and the earthquake in New Zealand. The first of those events came to be closely associated with the protesters’ use of social media - to the extent that it became part of the way the story was reported. ‘Seeking to Disrupt Protesters, Syria Cracks Down on Social Media,’ read one 2011 headline in the *New York Times*. In order to reflect the growing importance in journalism of social media, I arranged a session with one of the BBC’s leading newsgathering producers, Stuart Hughes. He has himself pioneered many of the current uses of social media in broadcast journalism. This gave the students the opportunity to learn from a leading practitioner, and to adopt his techniques almost immediately into their own practice.

However, while it was important to reflect on changes in professional practice, Bull’s definition of ‘the fundamentals of good journalism’ was also important. ‘These fundamentals, the principles of reporting – of storytelling – do not change. They don’t go out of date, and are common across all media.’ (2010:xi). In other words, the evaluation should not value incorporating changing practice into the module at the expense of teaching those ‘principles of reporting’, which will assist students throughout their future professional life, and, almost certainly, endure as indispensable journalistic tools long after many of today’s social media sites are obsolete.

Conclusion

The area in which I feel the project succeeded best from my point of view as a lecturer was where it included revisions which reflected developing practice in the professional world. The evaluation provided the opportunity, before the module was delivered for the second time, to identify those areas – in this case, the use of social media in particular – and make sure that appropriate new material was incorporated into the module. One conclusion which stands out above all others is the fact that, if this module, and the University’s journalism education in general, are to continue to provide students with the practical and intellectual skills needed to work as journalists, this is a process which will have to continue. As Schwalbe wrote, ‘Just as journalism is being reinvented in a global online world, so too must educators begin to reconfigure some of the ways they teach.’ (2009:63). This will not always be a straightforward process. Reflecting on the profound and unpredictable changes affecting journalism today, lecturers would do well to remember Aumente’s description of the challenges facing them as educators, ‘The task faced by journalism

and communication schools and departments in upgrading their curricula is akin to training pilots to fly experimental planes that are only partly operational for an aviation industry being totally transformed.’ (2007:86).

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Biographical note: James Rodgers is Senior Lecturer in International Journalism at London Metropolitan University, where he is course leader for the MA in International Journalism, and the BSc in Media, Communications, and Journalism. He spent twenty years as a journalist – five at Reuters Television, and fifteen at the BBC – before becoming a full time lecturer. For most of his BBC career (1995-2010), he was a foreign correspondent, completing postings in Moscow, Brussels, and Gaza. In addition, he reported on numerous of other international stories including the aftermath of the September 11th attacks, and the 2003 invasion of Iraq. His areas of research interest are the effects on journalism of changing, and the work of journalists in wartime. He is the author of *Reporting Conflict* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).