



Experiential learning and journalism education

Lessons learned in the practice of teaching journalism

John Steel, Bill Carmichael, David Holmes,
Marie Kinse and Karen Sanders

Department of Journalism Studies, University of Sheffield, Sheffield, UK

Experiential
learning and
journalism

325

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to detail research into experiential learning and journalistic practice in the Department of Journalism Studies at the University of Sheffield.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper explores a range of themes and issues stemming from the application of an experiential learning approach to postgraduate journalism education at the University of Sheffield. Following the experiential learning exercise, a number of semi-structured interviews were conducted with students and teaching staff in order to get an insight into their perceptions and experiences of the learning exercise.

Findings – The development of experiential learning programmes within journalism education provides valuable experiences that simulate the real world of journalism practice. Further reflective research work would be required to embed such learning approaches within journalism practice modules across the UK.

Practical implications – Embedding experiential learning exercises within vocationally orientated MA programmes requires reflective and ongoing curriculum development. Moreover, the establishment of more reflective elements within programmes will aid the research process in future explorations of this type.

Originality/value – Research on experiential learning on postgraduate journalism programmes within a British context is minimal. The research hopes to stimulate further work in this area.

Keywords Education, Experiential learning, Postgraduates, Working practices, United Kingdom

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

For three days in early May 2005, 50 postgraduate journalism students and eight postgraduate students of political communication in the Department of Journalism Studies at the University of Sheffield decided to tear up the timetable and become a real newsgathering operation covering the general election. Between May 4 and 6 they produced two newspapers, a website, 11 radio news bulletins, a three-hour “as live” radio programme and two television news magazine programmes. They worked as the professionals would – reporting and analysing the political campaign, covering and analysing the results.

The use of models of experiential learning to complement existing learning and teaching approaches has been used across disciplines for a number of years. In particular, within the service professions such as medicine (Hughes, 1994; Burnard, 2002), social work (Downey and Miles, 2005; King, 2003) and law (Maranville, 2001), experiential approaches to learning are now well established. There is also evidence



that science-based subjects can benefit from experiential approaches to learning (Coll *et al.*, 2002). However, though the teaching of practical aspects of journalism is commonplace in journalism education, research on this process is limited. The rationale for this exercise was to provide a learning experience for students that would replicate, as closely as possible, the real world of journalistic practice. As Lynch *et al.* (2006) note, the “emphasis upon situation and context provides a broader yet deeper way in which everyday learning in higher education and the workplace can be understood”. Not only were students engaging with a real and important story – the British general election – but they were also working as organised teams which replicated how different departments work within large media organisations. In doing so, they would enable the authors to explore the value of experiential learning within this context.

The purpose of the research into the experiential learning was twofold. First and most obviously, the project placed a research spotlight on the learning process of this group of students. It aimed to explore the experiential learning approach (Kolb, 1984; Brandon, 2002) from the perspective of the students themselves. How did the students respond to such a learning experience? What did they think they gained? What did they find most challenging and, most importantly, what did they think they learned from the whole experience? Second, the authors wanted to re-examine how journalists are being forced to find new ways of working, given that boundaries between traditionally separate journalistic disciplines like broadcast and print are becoming increasingly blurred, a process known as convergence (Franklin, 1997; Auletta, 1998; Kolodzy, 2003; Kawamoto, 2003). Yet research into how this process relates to a learning and teaching context is limited. Moreover, research into the ways in which students learn from and with each other through the development of communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) within journalism is relatively under-researched. This paper outlines the rationale, process and outcomes of the experiential learning that took place during this project. It explores the main issues raised by the research into the process and how lessons learned from this project can be embedded into the journalism curriculum at Sheffield.

The course tutors took responsibility for designing the journalistic output in each medium, and the overall management of the project. However, they also decided to appoint a student leader from each group, with responsibility for co-ordinating their peers’ activities. There was also a steering group, comprised of the tutors and student leaders, which met daily in the run up to election day and arranged access to the count on election night. The tutors decided to let students select their own roles within their teams, and left the students to determine what stories to cover. Approaches to student assessment varied according to each course. This later became significant, as discussed below.

Method

The project was initially designed around three research instruments:

- (1) student interviews;
- (2) a student questionnaire; and
- (3) a reflective student diary.

However, this research draws specifically on the student interviews, as students seemed reluctant to engage with the reflective diary component of the research and questionnaire response was low. The authors reflect on the implications of this in the conclusion to this paper.

There were four different groups of students from four different MA courses:

- (1) Broadcast;
- (2) Print;
- (3) Web; and
- (4) Political Communication.

Following the election, ten students (approximately 11 per cent of the total cohort) were interviewed to gain a reflective insight into their perceptions and experiences of the project. The students volunteered to be interviewed. Their profile is spread more or less evenly across the four MA courses (see Table I).

The interviews were tape recorded and transcribed and intended to elicit a range of reflective responses from the students. Analysis of the tape-recorded interviews was attempted through a phenomenographic prism (Marton and Saljo, 1997; Saljo, 1998) so as to gain an insight into how the students experienced the project and explore how students experience aspects of their learning. Such an approach is useful in learning and teaching research as it positions the student experience at the centre of the learning process. It can inform the development of learning and teaching via a reflective approach (Prosser and Trigwell, 1999). "The aim of phenomenography is to describe qualitatively the different ways of experiencing phenomena" (Jones and Asensio, 2001, p. 315). As such the open-ended questions used in the interviews were stimulated by the aims of the project and by attempting to see the process through the eyes of the students.

Analysis

To make sense of the range of perspectives of the election project, the authors have arranged the student responses into themes. Examples of the student responses are included to elucidate these themes and provide substance to the analysis.

	British	International	Political Communication	Broadcast	Print	Web
SI 1		×	×			
SI 2		×			×	
SI 3	×				×	
SI 4		×	×			
SI 5		×				×
SI 6		×		×		
SI 7		×		×		
SI 8	×				×	
SI 9	×			×		
SI 10		×				×

Table I.
Student profile

Anxiety

The first theme that emerged from the interviews was a strong sense of anxiety from a number of students. The focus of the anxiety differed according to a number of factors. For example there was some uncertainty and unfamiliarity about the workings of the British electoral system, particularly from the international students:

I was a bit anxious at the beginning because I'm an overseas student and know nothing about the election in the UK and I found it difficult for me to catch up ... (SI 7).

This element of anxiety was also present in terms of international students being unsure whether the questions they were asking on the street or to candidates might make them sound stupid or particularly uninformed. A number of students also talked about how they were initially worried about how the project itself might impact on other work deadlines, and about work overload in general. There was also some initial anxiety amongst a few international students about their English. They worried their language would not be up to scratch for a "real life" project such as this. Although anxiety was a feature of some of the student responses, it was short lived. Once the students were immersed in their activities, the ones who cited being particularly anxious felt their anxiety disappear and their confidence grow. Moreover, a number of students noted that though they were nervous about the project, they welcomed the opportunity to put themselves under pressure.

Confidence

Growth in student confidence was a discernable element from the student interviews. Students talked specifically and at length about how involvement in the project enabled them to become more confident in their abilities. They felt much more at ease with the prospect of working in a real news environment and dealing with real issues and real people:

... the kind of beneficial side for me was getting out and talking to people, that was really good practice, you know. I don't want to do production I want to be a reporter so going out and doing that was great, talking to people, meeting people. Going to the Conservative Club on my own was an experience, I had no idea where it was in Sheffield, turned up, didn't know what people were going to be like. That was a good learning experience because it's building your confidence ... (SI 8).

Group organisation

The ways in which the groups were organised was another theme that emerged very strongly from all of the students interviewed. In particular, who would lead each group seemed to be a bone of contention for two groups. As noted, the leaders of the specific teams were chosen by the course tutor. But this did not sit well with the groups. During the pre-election organisation phase, one group in particular seemed not only to resent being told who the leader would be, but also the person who was chosen. Either this was because some individuals within the group wanted to be the leader, or because they doubted the competence of the person who was chosen. Though these issues could have had a very negative impact on the project, they seemed to be overcome during election night itself. Even the initially unpopular team leader won over her doubters. As a result of the initial disquiet about the selection of team leaders, some students

suggested that it should have been the course tutor who led their groups because of his or her experience in the media.

The organisation of specific roles – who did what – within the teams, and how this was decided, was another significant theme to emerge from the students. Though not all students were happy about the roles that were allocated to them by their team leaders, most were happy to be asked to be responsible for something that they felt confident in doing:

I've sort of got a bit of a flair for page layout, I mean I can do it fairly quickly. And so I sort of just ... on the actual night of the election ... (SI 3).

Clearly co-operation was necessary for a project such as this to work effectively. The way in which the different teams interacted with each other is dealt with below under “Convergence”. However, students emphasised how they worked together within their teams. This is interesting and largely positive, especially if we bear in mind the organisational controversies noted above.

Convergence

Convergence is crucially important within contemporary analyses of media organisations. As noted above, the notion that different sections of the media (e.g. web and print, radio and television, broadcast and web) can work relatively seamlessly together is a current that runs through contemporary organisational thinking within the media. Technological advances mean it is much easier now for different media to share resources and material. This idea of convergence is something the research team was particularly keen to explore. However, the student response relating to this was coloured by a range of different perspectives. It is clear that students across the disciplines worked together at times during the project, but there were interesting differences in perception and experience. Also, it was evident that there was a perception that some groups co-operated with others, whereas some did not. For example, the Political Communication students noted that they worked well with the Broadcast students and the Web students, yet there was a perception that the Print students seemed reluctant to co-operate fully with other groups. Explanations for these perceptions are suggested in the “Discussion” section of this paper (see below). One of the surprises from the student transcripts was the competition between the groups. This was manifest when students failed to share resources:

... and so they wanted to keep all of their resources to themselves because they decided they were going to send their ‘breaking news’ to a major newspaper ... But that was just annoying because we were all meant to be working together and then when individual egos get in the way it’s just a bit, a bit pathetic (SI 9).

There was also some bitterness about one team allegedly stealing stories from another team with some students explicitly “pointing the finger” at colleagues from another team. Though noted, these negative comments have to be put in perspective. Overall the overwhelming response from students was that they thought they worked with other teams:

... the election project dissolved that barrier and you come to know one another very well because at this particular time you are aiming at the same goal (SI 4).

These contradictory experiences of rivalry and cooperation mirror those that some of the authors have known in professional newsrooms. In just a few days, the students appeared to have hit precisely the problems and benefits that have made convergence such a tough – yet rewarding – nut to crack for working journalists.

Another interesting element to emerge from the transcripts was the perception that some teams had more power in relation to the communication of political messages than others. This was evident from the interviews with the Political Communication students, who suggested that their messages were at times being “managed” by the Broadcast students. This perception of a “managed message” could be explained by a number of factors, one of which might relate to Political Communication students’ unfamiliarity with the production process. The Political Communication students at times found it difficult to deal with some of these production constraints in that though they were told what to talk about, there was the perception that they were at times being told exactly what to say. Clearly the interaction between the Political Communication students and the Broadcast students was perceived as at times overly prescriptive from the perspective of the Political Communication students. This perception of power imbalance from a selection of the Political Communication students is mirrored by a similar perception from the leader of the broadcast group. She suggests that it is the experts who ultimately have the upper hand in the relationship between journalists and the political communicators:

I think that it is unrealistic to think that you could, you know, get every story that you wanted and not to a certain extent have to pander to the authorities because I think you do (SI 9).

Doing it for real – managing the pressure

The election project imposed a heavy workload on the students, some of whom (because of the distinctive assessment practices of their modules) would not be marked for their contributions. This was of initial concern for the teaching team – if they were not being marked, how could we ensure that they would give it their all? As expected, some students picked up on this discontinuity, some suggesting that their work should have been assessed, and others saying that that they were worried about the impact of this project on their other work, given that they were not to be assessed.

From a learning and teaching perspective the election project can be seen as a success. All the students reported a positive experience in terms of how much they learned by “doing it for real”. This learning was not only related to the technical and procedural elements of working within the media, but also how much they had learned about themselves. This reaction is all the more powerful given that the students really were plunged in at the deep end. From a tutor’s perspective, one of the most rewarding sentiments to emerge from the students was the sense of enjoyment and pride in being involved in a project such as this:

... that’s the first time I acted like a real journalist especially on the election day. And before, it’s all just a concept. I just love the thrill of reporting and dealing with the real [that] happen, important things in the world (SI 10).

Discussion

This research has provided some interesting and surprising insights into the students' experience of working on the election project which the teaching team are keen to reflect upon. The main benefit of the project has been to relate to students the realities of life in a real media environment within the context of a significant "event" in the political and journalistic calendar. Though a number of students initially questioned the rationale of the project, the message did get through about the importance of just "doing it for real".

The notion of anxiety seems crucial, much of the anxiety that was reported seemed to be framed around the normal stresses one might find in a newsroom environment: technical difficulties, working with other people, and of course tight deadlines. Tutors noted on election night that students seemed to grow in confidence as they dealt with the chaos of their particular newsrooms, and this growth in confidence is reflected in the student response. However, some of the anxieties raised related to themes that require further reflection. In particular, the issue of assessment and workload has necessitated a more consistent approach across the disciplines so that there is some equity in relation to what each team gains from engaging in the project. For future projects, an earlier lead-in time would be beneficial, as the groundwork can be laid and the students will be able to prepare more fully for simulation-based work. Also, students will have the opportunity of using material from projects in their final course assessments. The issue of assessment, however, was more of a concern for international students. Though in our sample, the proportion of international students is disproportionate to the number of international students across the three programmes, the issues raised by this cohort should be considered, in particular in the area of providing extra support for international students in relation to the specific teaching method (Van der Wende, 1996; Steel, 2000) and the students' knowledge of politics and political institutions in Britain. Learning styles differ greatly across continents and the extent of the differences could be taken into account more fully in a project such as this. These issues noted, students said they grew more confident in their abilities through participating in the project.

As part of the project, the teaching team wanted to examine the extent to which convergence would be apparent between the various groups over the three days. Students surprised the teaching team with the extent to which they engaged with the notion in some circumstances, but not in others. However, the difficulties were similar to those that have dogged professional news organisations when they have tried to bring separate teams closer together (Harrison, 2000). The teams worked best together when it was in their self-interest to do so. Thus the Broadcast team worked well with the Political Communication team – on the night of the election, the Political Communication students were able to fill holes in the air-time. This satisfied the broadcasters' need for material, and gave the Political Communication students an outlet for their research. The Web team were too small to send many reporters out to find stories, but were still hungry for material to fill their web pages. This material was gratefully received in the form of copy, audio and video from the other teams. Convergence was also apparent at the planning stage, when it was in everybody's self-interest to share ideas for stories and to avoid duplicated newsgathering effort. The teams worked least well together when deadlines were approaching and attention focussed on getting the best stories out as quickly as possible. As in the real-world

news environment, a strong competitive spirit emerged between the teams, and sometimes between team members. Students were keen to “just get on with their own tasks” and focus on their particular part of the project. The students clearly benefited from greater cooperation and communication, even at pressurised times. Achieving this, however, may require more sophisticated multimedia structures and organisation than we put in place for this project. It may also necessitate a clearly communicated explanation from the course tutors about the mutual benefits of cross-disciplinary teamwork. Group organisation and leadership were also dominant themes from the student interviews. The rationale for the course leaders choosing the team leader was to ensure that the person who was in their view most capable of managing their teams was in charge. On reflection, though this worked well from an organisational point of view, it caused resentment among students, who felt they should have decided themselves who was to lead their team. A fine balance was required to ensure that neither too little nor too much organisation was imposed on the students by the course leaders. Too much, and they would not experience the demands that would replicate the real pressures of work in the media. Equally, too little organisation may have had a significant impact on the outcomes of the students’ work. Failure to “pull it off” could have had quite a negative impact on the intended learning outcomes of the project. Significant operational failure, though a feature of the real world of work, would have been counter-productive within this learning and teaching environment. It would have undermined students’ confidence as well as jeopardising the overall learning and teaching aims of the project. Teaching staff therefore felt obliged to intervene and “manage” so as to prevent problems escalating into disasters. This balance of pressures is something that the teaching team are now reflecting upon. Future research within this area of journalism teaching would be useful.

Conclusion

As experiential learning approaches become more established within higher education, research exploring the issues and challenges of these approaches will necessarily benefit experiential teaching programmes across disciplines. As noted, within journalism education, research into approaches to learning is somewhat limited. This paper has not only sought to stimulate reflection on our journalism teaching at Sheffield, but the authors also hope that further research can be undertaken by other journalism educators into the practice of teaching journalism in all its aspects. As both an academic and practice based subject, journalism learning and teaching offers fertile ground for those wishing to develop their approaches to teaching within a reflective research based context. For example, debates about convergence continue to resonate within journalism education, yet we have only touched on the issue. Research critically exploring different approaches to learning and teaching convergence, and the range of issues related to this topic, would of course be useful given the expansion of convergent journalism within the industry. Another fertile area of research would be in exploring the relationship between academic content and the practical components provided on journalism undergraduate degrees. For example how (if at all) could scholars make the most of experiential learning and teaching of the practice of journalism in ways that relate to, and complement, the academic components of the degree? Similarly, how can scholars relate the theoretical and historical components of journalism education to the more practical aspects of journalism education?

This project has raised interest in simulated learning environments within our own department at Sheffield. From a curriculum development perspective the experience was deemed a success, as the student feedback about the process was overwhelmingly positive. The teaching team has been heartened at the generally positive response from the students, especially when this was set against constraints such as lack of time, the burden of other workloads, and other organisational difficulties. It is hoped that through this small pilot study, further empirical research can be undertaken which will not only more firmly establish the learning and teaching of journalism (and experiential learning in particular) as a central component of journalism studies, but also enhance the learning experience from the perspective of both staff and students. Events as significant as a General Election obviously do not occur every day. However, the teaching team recognises the benefits of focussing on specific important events (such as local elections or by-elections) in which students “become journalists” for a short time in their studies. Certainly lessons have been learned from this research. A longer lead-in time would have helped situate the students more firmly within the learning paradigm the teaching team sought to develop. A more systematic and co-ordinated approach to course assessment may be needed, to ensure equity and motivation. Moreover, questions about how we as educators manage the balance between, on the one hand, throwing students in at the deep end so that they resolve problems and learn through doing, yet, on the other, still retaining sufficient control to guarantee that they experience a positive and productive outcome. These questions might fruitfully be explored through further research.

References

- Auletta, K. (1998), “Synergy city”, *American Journalism Review*, available at: www.ajr.org/article.asp?id=3273 (accessed August, 2006).
- Brandon, W. (2002), “Experiential learning: a new research path to the study of journalism education”, *Journalism & Mass Communication Educator*, Vol. 57 No. 1, pp. 59-66.
- Burnard, P. (2002), *Learning Human Skills. An Experiential and Reflective Guide for Nurses and Health Care Professionals*, 4th ed., Butterworth-Heinemann, Oxford.
- Coll, B.K., Lay, M.C. and Zegwaard, K.E. (2002), “Enhancing access to experiential learning in a science and technology degree programme”, *Journal of Vocational Education and Training*, Vol. 54 No. 2, pp. 197-217.
- Downey, E.P. and Miles, B.K. (2005), “‘Betty is someone I will never forget’: an experiential learning model with older adults”, *The Journal of Baccalaureate Social Work*, Vol. 11 No. 11, pp. 95-104.
- Franklin, B. (1997), *Newzak and News Media*, Arnold, London.
- Harrison, J. (2000), *Terrestrial TV News in Britain: The Culture of Production*, Manchester University Press, Manchester.
- Hughes, R. (1994), “A critical evaluation of the use of andragogical models in tackling social inequality in nursing education”, *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, Vol. 20, pp. 1011-7.
- Jones, C. and Asensio, M. (2001), “Experiences of assessment: using phenomenography for evaluation”, *Journal of Computer Assisted Learning*, Vol. 17 No. 3, pp. 314-21.
- Kawamoto, K. (2003), *Digital Journalism*, Rowman & Littlefield, Oxford.
- King, M.E. (2003), “Social work education and service learning”, *The Journal of Baccalaureate Social Work*, Vol. 8 No. 2, pp. 37-48.

- Kolb, D. (1984), *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development*, Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, NJ.
- Lynch, R., Leo, S. and Downing, K. (2006), "Context dependent learning: its value and impact for workplace education", *Education + Training*, Vol. 48 No. 1, pp. 15-24.
- Maranville, D. (2001), "Infusing passion and context into the traditional law curriculum through experiential learning", *Journal of Legal Education*, Vol. 51 No. 1, pp. 51-74.
- Marton, F. and Saljo, R. (1997), "Approaches to learning", in Marton, F., Entwistle, N. and Hounsell, D. (Eds), *Experience of Learning*, Scottish Academic Press, Edinburgh.
- Prosser, M. and Trigwell, K. (1999), *Understanding Learning and Teaching: The Experience in Higher Education*, Open University Press, Buckingham.
- Saljo, R. (1998), "Learning in educational settings: methods of inquiry", in Ramsdan, P. (Ed.), *Improving Learning: New Perceptions*, Kogan Page, London.
- Steel, J. (2000), "Educational technology and internationalisation of higher education", in Hudson, B. and Todd, M. (Eds), *Internationalising the Curriculum in Higher Education*, Sheffield Hallam University Press, Sheffield.
- Kolodzy, G. (2003), "Everything that rises", *Columbia Journalism Review*, Vol. 4 No. 1, p. 61.
- Van der Wende, M.C. (1996), "Internationalising the curriculum in higher education", *Internationalisation of Higher Education*, OECD, Paris.
- Wenger, E. (1998), *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning and Identity*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Corresponding author

John Steel can be contacted at: j.steel@sheffield.ac.uk