

Utilizing mentoring feedback in Journalism work placements: producing work-ready graduates for the 21st century newsroom

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INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Australian Higher Education and WIL

In 2008, the Australian government under the new Labor leadership embarked on an 'education revolution' that aims to provide universal access to a high quality education from the earliest age, world-class teaching and learning in schools, and effective training and ongoing learning opportunities in universities and the workplace (Prime Minister of Australia, 2009). Through this education revolution, it is envisioned that Australia will become one of the most educated and highly skilled workforces in the world, and thus be able to secure national long term economic prosperity (Prime Minister of Australia, 2009).

Consequently, a review of higher education in the country was undertaken which lists nine key challenges and issues for higher education in Australia over the coming decades. Not surprisingly to many, first among these challenges is higher education's capacity in order to meet the needs of the labor market and industry for high level skills (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2008). These skills, which were identified in a 2007 study revealed that:

- Industry was satisfied with technical skills but see employability skills as under-developed;
- Higher education and training must meet industry employability skill needs; and
- Employability skills are acquired through many different experiences (Business and Higher Education Collaboration Council, 2008).

Among the recommendations resulting from the study included:

- Setting up an employability strategy fund to support development of strategies to address employability skills; and
- Funding to support work-integrated learning initiatives and integration of employability skills into curricula.

Journalism and WIL

A key feature of Journalism education at James Cook University (as with all other Australian journalism schools) has been that student graduates are able to demonstrate that they not only know the subject but can do the work in the real world. Students are taught the skills of news writing and other forms of journalistic writing, sound and video production as well as computer and online skills. These are coupled with theoretical discussions of society and world perspectives that serve to contextualize the work students produce. At different stages of each subject, students are required to gather their own news stories and produce their own 'texts', whether these are in the form of print, broadcast or online materials. These exercises form a substantial part of their learning process particularly in addressing areas such as politics, law, economics, culture, government, people and place in Australian society and the world.

One other way by which students are able to learn journalism has been through internships and work placement. It has been long-accepted that in order to ensure that students can actually 'do' the work is by providing them opportunities to experience learning that utilizes their academic experience within a real workplace. Through this interaction with journalists in the field, learning revolves around discovery, analysis and integration of information leading to deep-level learning. Students develop effective communication and become adept at problem-solving. The Australian journalists' profession association/union, the Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA) lists these two ways of entering the journalism profession. On its website, it states: 'Traditionally there are two ways into journalism' – University Degree or Cadetship (Alliance Online, 2009). Under university degree, the MEAA is quick to

point out that while university degrees are well regarded by majority of employers, it will be to the student's advantage "if you can back them up with relevant industry experience" (p. 1).

In a broad sense, this approach to learning is what Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) programs aim to offer. WIL is an attempt by educators to provide a 'schooling-to-work' pathway to support employability (Calway, 2006). WIL aims to assist in producing work-ready graduates who are also lifelong learners.

This emphasis on real-world experience is made more urgent by the current trend of the ever-changing newsroom. Media convergence has forced previously separate technologies and processes in the newsroom to come together, and synergistically create new efficiencies. In the 2006 State of the News Print Media in Australia Report published by the Australia Press Council, it notes one of the five major trends in the industry, major changes in the role and expectations of journalists (SNPMA, 2006). The report notes that in the future, journalists employed by newspaper companies will find their stories used not only in print, but also in other news media such as online and television. This implies that the journalist will have to be multiskilled in the various formats. It may also imply that given the huge cost of running a converged newsroom, many employers are cutting back on hiring and instead, looking to hire a Jack (or Jill)-of-all-trades type of journalist. Already, we have seen news organizations such as Fairfax Media which cut 550 jobs in August 2008? in an effort to bolster profitability (Fairfax Media to cut 550 jobs, 2008). This figure represents 5% of the company's workforce in Australia, and New Zealand.

CONTEXT

Research presented in this paper serves as background to a larger research project on enhancing the journalism work placement program at JCU to produce work-ready graduates for the twenty-first century newsroom. Specifically, the study aims to identify the gaps between academic training in journalism and actual needs and expectations of employers. It is hoped that mentors will also come to appreciate their role in the socialisation process while giving feedback that allows the student to reflect on learning and development as a journalist. Feedback can also be used by the University in reshaping its journalism curriculum. Ultimately, a true working reciprocal relationship will be established and all three partners will benefit. Funding for the research is provided by JCU's Work Integrated Learning initiative through the Carrick Institute for Learning & Teaching.

METHOD

Data was collected from reports submitted by placement supervisors or mentors to the university at the end of the student's work placement. These reports date from 2003 to 2008. A qualitative analysis was performed on the mentors' reports. Data were collated, analysed for recurring themes, which were turned into key phrases reflecting the mentors' comments. Pseudonyms have been used to preserve confidentiality. It is worth noting that prior to this study these mentor reports have not been utilized in any useful manner except as proof that the student had completed the work placement subject. This is a major oversight as these reports contain valuable information on the mentors' views and recommendations on the value of the work placement and the skills and weaknesses JCU journalism students possess close to or at the time of completion of their university study.

RESULTS

There were 28 supervisor reports obtained and they ranged from 2003 to 2008. It should be noted that before 2009, the internship/placement subject was not required of the students. It is only this year that all journalism majors are required to undertake placement and this is in response to expressed requirements by employers for entering cadets to have had real newsroom experience.

Strengths

Majority of the mentors expressed satisfaction over the quality of student writing and their preparedness to undertake writing assignments. For example, Scott wrote: "Sarah handled tasks with

aplomb a minimum of supervision. She produced news releases at a consistent quality and had many pieces picked up by the local media.”

A number of mentors praised the interviewing skills interns brought into the work. For example:

Melissa proved she could carry out an interview both over the phone and on-site. She managed to turn these interviews into stories.

Mark was capable of approaching almost anybody and getting interesting responses to the most varied of questions. He asked the right questions and got on with it, so that the work could be completed to deadline without too much fuss.

From their comments, it was noted that majority of the mentors required that interns display initiative in pitching a story idea, and getting it. During an initial meeting of an industry advisory board for JCU's journalism degree, ABC North Queensland Online's Winsome Denyer, herself a JCU journalism graduate, said more than writing skills, students need to be able to generate story ideas (Unpublished minutes, 2009). It is as important to be able to determine if there is a story and what it is, as being able to write it. In today's generation user-generated content, otherwise known as citizen journalism, it is important for journalists to know what kind of stories are of interest to their readers.

Areas of Improvement

It is quite interesting that while mentors praised the high quality of writing that interns brought to the placement, it is the same theme that received the most comment for improvement and revision. Admittedly, the changing media landscape has forced many journalists to be able to adapt to various publishing platforms - print, radio, broadcast and on-line. JCU's current journalism curriculum is still heavily print-orientated, and thus trains students for this platform. The majority of the mentors indicated a need for students to be aware of what platform they are targeting for their stories:

Generally, Wayne's writing technique is very good. However, he often struggled with the concept of "writing how we speak." He often wrote as though writing for a newspaper rather than radio news copy.

The quality of Sean's work improved over the semester as he adapted to the television style of writing. However, most of his stories still required fairly substantial subbing [i.e., subediting]. He has indicated a willingness to work on his voice, which will be necessary for him to be put on air.

The difficulty with adapting to different platforms also brought to light the need for students to be technically proficient in computer use, audio and video editing software and other online skills. Two mentors commented on how well two interns were able to adapt and learn the new technology quickly:

Gina quickly became proficient in the use of the ABC equipment used in collecting and editing audio stories: The Marantz recorder and Netia editing.

Her [Tanya's] technical skills were remarkable. She was often only introduced to something relatively new – like our audio-editing system – once, and would master it within a couple of attempts, if not, at once!

What the above comments indicate is a need for current journalism students wishing to gain employment in an industry that is now technologically-driven, to be exposed to such technology. This can create quite a problem as there are many types of equipment and software available. However, basic skills in the use of specific software for editing audio and video, for example, are transferable and useful in adapting to varying models and software. Finally, many of the mentors commented on the need for interns to display more professionalism on the job. Meeting deadlines and handling pressure were common themes reiterated by mentors. There were also scattered comments on manner of dress, punctuality, the need to establish rapport with newsroom staffers and the need for students to develop confidence and initiative in performing assigned tasks.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The comments and recommendations of journalism mentors yielded valuable feedback on the current journalism offering at James Cook University. In general, mentors are satisfied with the print writing skills that students bring to the work placement, due in large part to the (still) print orientated training students receive. Interviewing skills which are taught as an integral part to the news gathering process was also cited as a strength which can be utilized across various media platforms.

The areas of improvement give rise to issues that need to be addressed if JCU is to continue producing work-ready graduates in journalism. Most notable is validation for the continuance of the journalism internship subject where students are exposed to real life work situations in a real world newsroom.

Comments relating to initiative, confidence, enthusiasm and building rapport with co-workers all point to areas which may fall beyond the realm of academic instruction, but could well be part of a strengthened WIL-enhanced placement that results in better socialization, and contextualization for the student. Through the placement, the student is exposed to a diverse range of working styles and cultures. For their part, mentors benefit from engaging with bright, energetic and focused young people. They are able to monitor student performance and to train students with specific skills suited to the organization with a view to longer term employment.

A significant implication from the research is the apparent lag between journalism curricula offered by Australian universities, and real work requirements for young journalists to be multi-skilled across the various media platforms, a facet of today's technologically driven news delivery systems. These preliminary findings will serve to inform the next phase of the research which involves gathering more detailed responses from employers within the journalism profession regarding needs and expectations. Literature and preliminary interviews with colleagues from the University of Sydney, University of western Australia, Queensland University and Bond University indicate that journalism academics are aware of this lag, and are in the process of assessing existing curricula to address this lag. For its part, JCU has undertaken a review of its journalism curriculum. The review which included convening an industry advisory board will seek to establish a new, refreshed bachelor's degree which addresses the gaps in basic storytelling skills, adaptability across media platforms and technical proficiency to address the rapidly changing environment of the twenty-first century newsroom.

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