Articles

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Educating 'rookies': might guided problem-based learning help first year journalism students begin to inter-relate theory and practice?

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Introduction:

Researchers for the Higher Education Academy in the UK have criticised Journalism educators for failing to clarify what they 'actually mean' regarding their claims to link theory and practice on their degree courses, as well as the broader theoretical implications of their stance (Kent, interview with author, 2007; Mallinder, interview with author, 2010).

But although there is a growing body of work on the problematic nature of the theory/practice divide in Journalism Studies, there is something of a black hole when it comes to research about students' actual experiences of the split – as well as their experiences of the pedagogic methods which might counter it. As the effect of teaching on student learning is often not what lecturers expect (Ramsden 1991:6), this means that Journalism educators often lack the kinds of evidence they need to make sure that their teaching strategies are effective. Indeed, Journalism educators have even been accused of lagging behind other subjects in this regard: failing to make use of, or build upon, existing pedagogic research regarding the relationship of theory and practice to inform their approach to teaching and learning (Seamon 2009).

Most importantly, nothing has been written about first year Journalism undergraduates' perceptions of the links between theory and practice – or their perception of the lack of any such links. This is unacceptable given that the first year is now believed to be crucial in shaping students' approaches to their learning throughout their degree, as well as their overall enjoyment of it (Ballinger 2003; Booth 1997; Smith 2004; Reason et al 2006; Trotter and Roberts 2006; Yorke et al 2008). Therefore, students' perceptions of learning in their first year have a critical bearing on their satisfaction and persistence with their course (Tinto 2001, 2006). Addressing the lack of research about Journalism students' experience of their learning in the first year at university can thus be seen to be a matter of financial, as well as pedagogic, importance for Higher Education institutions.

British universities now have particularly pressing financial reasons for examining the ways in which they might be able to help first year students make a successful and fulfilling transition into Higher Education. This is because this academic year is the first in which a new fees regime has come into effect, which makes universities far more reliant on student tuition fees, rather than government funding. This new regime has been brought about because of a decision which the UK government took two years ago to phase out the grants which had hitherto supported teaching in English universities, with the exception of a few high priority and high cost subjects, such as science, medicine and mathematics (Higher Education Funding Council for England 2012). In order to make up some of the shortfall caused by the withdrawal of eighty per cent of government funding for teaching (Fenton 2011), the UK government then passed a law which enabled English universities to nearly triple the level of student tuition fees[1] (Higher Education (Higher Amount) Regulations 2010).

The devolved nature of political decision-making in the UK means that the Scottish Parliament, as well as the Welsh and Northern Irish Assemblies, were free to make their own policies on the funding of Higher Education, albeit to differing degrees, given the extent of the powers devolved to them. These political bodies decided to raise the fees which English students would be charged at their universities, whilst simultaneously implementing a range of measures to protect their own students from bearing the full costs of university education (Scottish Government 2010; Stuart 2011; Welsh Assembly Government 2010). So how tuition fees are levied across the UK is quite complex, with different fees being charged according to where the student in question was living prior to application, as well as the location of their chosen institution[2].

What is clear is that the introduction of higher tuition fees has prompted a marked decrease in applications for university places across the UK. The final applications statistics for this academic year had not been released at the time of writing because the post-result application process known as 'Clearing' had only just finished (Davies 2012). But the results of the main part of the application process, which takes place on the basis of students' predicted grades, showed that number of British people applying for a place at university had fallen by nearly thirty thousand (Universities and Colleges Admissions Service 2012b). Thus the environment in which all British universities operate can be seen to have become much, much more competitive.

Improving and demonstrating 'student satisfaction' has long been seen as playing a key role in enabling universities to compete with one another to attract and retain students both within and outside of the UK (Douglas et al 2006; James et al 1999). For British institutions, concern about such matters came to the fore in 2005, when entering the National Student Survey - which seeks to measure students satisfaction with both their courses and their institutions in a largely quantitative manner - became mandatory for all English, Welsh and Northern Irish universities[3]. Obviously

1 Although these fees are only payable by graduates once they are earning in excess of £21,000pa.

2 For example a Scottish student studying at a Scottish institution will pay no tuition fees at all, but an English or Northern Irish student studying at the same university will be charged the full rate. Likewise a Northern Irish students studying at a Northern Irish institution can be charged the maximum of £3,465 but if they study at an institution elsewhere in the UK, they will be charged the full rate. Finally, a Welsh students studying anywhere in the UK will be offered a fee loan up to the total of £3,465, but will be offered an additional fee grant by the Welsh Assembly to help them pay for the increased cost of tuition anywhere in the UK..

3 Scottish institutions are not obliged to take part, although a number of them do so voluntarily

now that far fewer British students are applying to university, and now that universities are more financially reliant upon student tuition fees, concerns about being seen to 'do well' in the National Student Survey have become acute.

Yet the prominence given to the National Student Survey is highly controversial, not only because of questions about the adequacy of the methods employed (Swain 2009, discussed in Ramsden et al 2010), but also because of the ways in which stressing 'student satisfaction' as a measure of universities' success appears to frame the student as little more than a 'customer' whom institutions must provide with a pleasant 'experience' to consume (Sabri 2010, 2011). The erasure of academic identities and values this entails may also be seen as detrimental to students: subsuming their actual, complex and lived experiences to a generic, over-simplified and disembodied account of them (Sabri 2011). Such arguments have a particular resonance for Journalism Studies in the UK as Journalism courses usually operate in poorer, newer universities here, which have a longstanding history of expecting Journalism teams to effectively subsidise less popular subjects by attracting and maintaining very large student cohorts (Errigo and Franklin 2004:46; Harcup 2010: 41).

In addition, arguments about the involvement of 'student satisfaction' in market logic clearly have their roots in much broader political debates about the nature and purpose/s of Higher Education which have repercussions far beyond British borders (Bailey and Freedman 2011; Nussbaum 2012; Rhoten and Calhoun 2011). So although this paper does explore first year students' experience of the inter-relationship of theory and practice, and although this does have a bearing on student engagement, enjoyment, and persistence with their studies, it attempts to tread a fine line between acknowledging the importance of such issues in Journalism pedagogy and remaining wary of much of the commercially-driven discourse in and about Higher Education. It will begin by considering the pedagogic and epistemological implications of 'inter-relating' theory and practice[4] - the term used by the Journalism team at the University of Roehampton - before going on to outline the findings of a two-year project which I, as the First Year Tutor in Journalism at Roehampton, conducted into how Guided Problem-Based Learning affected first years' perceptions of these issues.

Inter-relating Theory and Practice:

Most British universities now claim that their Journalism degrees 'integrate' theory and practice (Greenberg 2007:299; Mallinder, interview with author, 2010). This 'promise' may appeal to university applicants (Poerksen 2010) but it is misguided, as it implies that the two will complement one another - when they often don't. This is because the majority of theoretical work on Journalism curricula in the UK is still drawn from the canon of Media and Cultural Studies, and the constructivist stance towards reality found in much of this work, as well as the scepticism about individual journalists' agency, does not sit comfortably with the teaching of best practice (Greenberg 2007; Wright 2011).

Such an observation is not new. A decade ago, Windschuttle sparked the so-called 'Media Wars' in Australia (Turner 2000) by arguing that including Media/Cultural Studies theory on Journalism curricula alongside practical tuition gave students a 'schizophrenic' experience of education. He even asserted that such theories should be seen as dangerous to sound journalistic practice: undermining 'the pursuit of truth and objectivity' and 'the ethical regard for media audiences' (2000). The ontological and epistemological ramifications of this row are still being considered by Journalism researchers (Greenberg 2007; Wright 2011).

For these reasons, the University of Roehampton, where I teach, encourages students to 'inter-relate', rather than 'integrate', theory and practice, as 'inter-relatedness' covers a wide range of potential relationships - including contrast and conflict. We believe that such a stance indicates an honesty about the nature of Journalism Studies as it is currently articulated in the UK, as well

4 I have addressed the ontological aspects of this issue elsewhere (2011).

as a pedagogic resistance to pre-empting students' relationship to both theory and practice. For, after all, might potentially fruitful, understandings not arise from a consideration of the friction between journalistic practice and Media/ Cultural Studies research (Zelizer 2004; 2011) - as well as from a consideration of their 'common ground' (Skinner et al 2001)?

Moreover, are there not still valid arguments to be had about the definition/s of 'theory' itself, given practitioner-theorists' exploration of the kinds of fluid, and often unwritten forms of knowledge possessed/practised by journalists (Greenberg 2007; Niblock 2007; Poerksen 2010: Wright 2012)? Certainly it seems foolhardy to me to foreclose such complex arguments by accepting Skinner et al's proposal that media and communications theory be seen as the (only) 'why' to the 'how' of journalistic method (2001).

However, admitting the radical epistemological uncertainty that exists in Journalism Studies has far-reaching implications for pedagogy. For if we must admit that we, as a body of teachers/ researchers, do not have a substantial body of 'shared assumptions' (Wingate 2007) about the kind/s of knowledge that it is possible - or desirable - to attain in our discipline, then rather than knowledge being conceptualised as something which has been finalised and which we, as scholars, possess, it must be seen as something which is 'under construction' - and indeed, as something which is contested by differing interest groups, including different groups of scholars (Foucault 2002; Harrison 2007).

But accepting the existence of disputes about the nature of 'knowledge' in Journalism Studies is one thing and moving towards teaching and learning strategies which can accommodate (and perhaps even celebrate) them is quite another. For, as Ballinger (2003), Booth (1997) and Smith (2004) all argue, many students arrive at university with the expectation that successful learning will mean the reproduction of an established body of knowledge, and when these expectations are thwarted, they tend to feel extremely anxious, confused and disorientated. Students whose tutors disagree amongst themselves about the very definition of knowledge are therefore likely to go through an even rockier transition period. Failing to engage explicitly with these students' expectations and experiences in ways which will enable their transition into the strange world of Journalism Studies is therefore not just unsound from a pedagogic point of view – it's unkind.

Hanna and Sanders' extensive study of students taking Journalism courses in the UK shows that the majority of them take the course because they have ambitions to become journalists themselves (2007:407.) So the kinds of knowledge-reproduction they are likely to expect (and indeed to aspire to) are related to professional journalistic practice. They are, as one fresher proudly informed me 'proper rookies now...We just want to be told how to do it right'. However, despite the strong tradition of vocational training in the history of Journalism education, this is an attitude with which many British Journalism lecturers - myself included - would be uneasy. For I remain committed, as Cole put it, to the idea that independent, critical thought should be upheld as the hallmark of 'graduateness' (2003; see also de Burgh 2003). Therefore the idea of churning out students who can replicate journalistic practice efficiently, but who cannot challenge or improve upon it, is repugnant to us.

For these reasons, there is a growing call in Journalism Studies for students to learn to engage in 'critical' or 'reflective' practice (Beliveau 2009; Burns 2004; Niblock 2007).Yet, as Niblock found, there is little consensus amongst educators about what this actually involves (2007). The only thing Journalism lecturers do seem to agree upon is the need to nudge students towards 'higher order' forms of learning - usually expressed as the ability to 'analyse, understand, appreciate significance [and] interpret' (Ramsden 1991:23). In order to engage with students' existing goals, including their career aspirations (Howells 2003), such a pedagogic strategy would need to put journalistic practice at its heart, but it would also need to avoid making competent repetition its only measure of success (Wilkins 1998), if it is to preserve the progressive, and even the transformative, potential of Higher Education.

Problem-Based Learning:

Problem-Based Learning (PBL) has long been associated with the goal of producing 'critical practitioners' in many fields (Albanese and Mitchell 1993; Boud and Feletti 1997; Savin-Baden 2000), and a number of internationally respected Journalism educators, such as Burns (1997, 2002, 2004), Meadows (1997), Robie (2002), have been highly enthusiastic about its capacity to prompt students to become 'active' learners: considering 'what they do and why they do it' (Burns 2004:7) in the context of real situations encountered in professional practice (Robie 2002), or realistic simulations of them (Burns 1997; Cameron 2001; Meadows 1997).

PBL differs from problem-solving approaches in that it presents the problem first: asking students to work in teams to identify and explore the resources and approaches they will need (Burns 1997; Jones 2005). So the curricula is organised around the problem rather than around content, and tutors become 'facilitators', coaching students to criss-cross different fields of knowledge according to what they think they will need to address the problem (Savoie and Hughes 1994; Wilkie 2000). Thus, PBL should enable students to formulate their own ways of inter-relating theory and practice whilst offering them

> ... an obvious answer to the question…"What does what I am learning...have to do with the real world?
> (Anderson & Biddle 1970, cited in Burns 2004: 12)

In so doing, it should also help them move towards 'deep learning' (Meadows 1997; Wilkie 2000). That is to say, it should help students to shift along Säljő's scale from a point at which they conceptualise knowledge as quantitative increase or reproduction, thtough the mid-point where they perceive knowledge as the acquisition of facts, skills and methods, and then on to more complex forms of engagement where they are able to relate parts of the subject matter to each other and the wider world thereby eventually gerenating new understandings and perspectives (Säljő 1979:443-51).

As Yorke and Longden's recent, seminal work on students' experience of their first year of Higher Education in the UK stressed the importance of 'active' learning and the need to consider undergraduates' social, alongside their academic, integration (2008), there seems to be a strong rationale for using PBL as the stimulus to small group work with first-year students. But even ardent fans of PBL like Meadows concede that its success depends on students' ability to 'relate new ideas to existing knowledge and understanding' (1997:98-9). Tan has also argued that those who lack a foundational knowledge of their subject, as well as basic research skills, can become overwhelmed by PBL (2004:181). Finally, Newman's empirical work demonstrates that students used to more didactic teaching/learning methods continue to struggle to adjust their expectations to the kind/s of learning involved in PBL, sometimes to such an extent that it results in low student satisfaction with the course, heightened staff/student conflict and high numbers of drop-outs (2004). Given British institutions' increased stress on proving 'student satisfaction' and retaining their student body for financial reasons, such consequences could be extremely damaging.

In addition to this, it is still rare for students in the UK enter Journalism degrees having taken a previous academic qualification in Journalism[5], and rates of academic failure and attrition are highest in the first year. So it may be advisable to use a more 'graduated' or 'structured' approach to Problem-Based Learning with new Journalism undergraduates (Tan 2004). These more heavily 'guided' forms of PBL (thereafter referred to as GPBL) involve tutors selecting a more clearly defined problem to start with, as well as offering students different kinds of 'scaffolding' to support their learning. For example, Greening (1998) and Armstrong (1999) suggest incorporating lectures and/or other resource material; offering learning objectives, study questions, or other 'hints'; and giving students assistance with breaking the task down into manageable 'chunks'. Stepien and Gallagher also recommend that students and tutors new to PBL try utilising much shorter 'tasters'

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5 Currently the only pre-degree qualification specifically in Journalism which it is possible for British students to take is the BTEC Higher National Diploma (Journalism) and entrants to Higher Education with a BTEC background are still in the minority.

or 'post-holes' inserted into a more traditional curriculum, in order to give students the time and opportunity to get used to their new roles and responsibilities in a relatively low-risk way (1993; see also Ertmer and Simons 2005). What follows, then, is an account of our attempts to assess whether 'postholes' of GPBL made a difference to first year undergraduates' perceptions of the inter-relationship/s of theory and practice at the University of Roehampton.

Introducing Guided Problem-Based Learning at Roehampton:

To begin with, it is worth stressing that this project was not originally envisaged as an experiment leading towards external academic publication, but was constructed and written up as part of the Journalism team's ongoing internal efforts to inform the revision of the Journalism course, and particularly the first year curricula, with the aim of moving towards the launch of a new Journalism single honours degree (starting 2012-13). This is in keeping with Roehampton's status as a nationally renowned centre of teaching and learning and its emphasis on the importance of research-based teaching. However, following the introduction of vastly increased tuition fees and the organisational, political and attitudinal changes which have accompanied it in Higher Education, the Association of Journalism Education indicated that other Journalism lecturers would be interested in, and could benefit from, our work in this area.

Therefore, this article focuses exclusively on reflections about the experiences of Roehampton students and the team themselves as GPBL novices. Therefore the investigatory methods used are flexible, incorporating my own and other tutors' observations about students' behaviour in seminar groups, alongside questionnaire data, when it seemed pertinent to do so. The specific circumstances relating to the Journalism course at Roehampton also means that it would be hard to generalise in any definitive way from this project. There are two main reasons for this: firstly, my intention was to research pedagogic strategies which might 'work' for Roehampton's students meant that I composed a sample at the beginning of the project whose participants exhibited a range of academic abilities which broadly reflected that of the overall year group at Roehampton at that time. As only one in nine first year students in that year group achieved an average of sixty per cent or higher in their first term, and as that was more or less representative of the abilities of the students which Roehampton attracted then, more able students are under-represented in this study.

Secondly, this project cannot be seen as having taken place in a controlled environment, as the entry grades increased slightly (by twenty UCAS points) over the two-year period of the study. Steps were taken to minimise the impact of this issue by sourcing participants for the second study who had achieved a range of grades for their work in the Autumn term which was similar to those in the first sample. Indeed, even if this were not the case, the range of approaches taken by academics working in Higher Education institutions to Journalism, not least in the form of offering professionally-accredited, or unaccredited courses, when coupled with the changes in the broader political and economic environment which I outlined earlier, would make me very reluctant to present the findings of this study as if it somehow 'proved' the impact of GPBL on all first year students' experiences of the relationship of theory and practice in Journalism. Instead, I would prefer this paper be read as a kind of 'learning journey' which attempts to explore some of the 'demi-regular' patterns found in a particular time, place, and with a particular kind of student group (Lawson 1998) in the hope of highlighting potential areas for future research, as well as potential pedagogic pitfalls, for others interested in investigating GPBL within their own institutions.

Procedure:

In February 2008, a sample of first year undergraduates was drawn from a pool of volunteers in ways which represented the composition of Roehampton's student body. Since Roehampton attracts far more women than men, this involved selecting fifteen female students and three male

students. Roehampton is also a very mixed campus ethnically, as well as recruiting strongly from some foreign countries: so a sample was chosen which broadly reflected the proportion of our students who are White British, Black British and Asian British, as well as the proportion who come from other EU countries, as well as African, Arabic and Scandinavian countries. In addition, Roehampton attracts many dyslexic students, as well as a number of students who are non-traditional entrants to Higher Education: for this reason, one dyslexic student was included in the sample, along with two students who had taken BTEC, Access, or National Diploma qualifications prior to university entry, rather than taking the more traditional route of A-levels.

As Roehampton's authorities do not make data about individual students' entry grades or points available to academics, students were selected whose grades in the autumn term broadly reflected those achieved across their year group in the core first year module, Producing and Debating Journalism. This involved selecting five students achieving a grade average which fell within the lowest classification of degree, a 3rd (40-49%); eleven achieving a grade average within the 2:2 range (50-59%); and two achieving a 2:1 or higher (from 60% upwards). The total sample amounted to eighteen students, which was twenty-two per cent of the year group.

A questionnaire was prepared containing a range of non-directive, open-ended questions, including questions about what why students were taking the course, and two other key questions:

•'How do you see theories about journalism relating (or not relating) to journalistic practice (i.e. doing journalism)?

•'How do you see the practice of journalism (i.e. doing journalism) relating (or not relating) to the theories about journalism'?

Participants then returned their answers anonymously - using participant numbers so that the researcher could cross-reference their responses to profile data. Students in the sample were asked to complete in the February following their Autumn term: this month was chosen because students' grades from the first semester are not finalised until the Exam Board sits that month, and it is not near any assessment deadlines so that students would not be deterred from participation.

When clarification was required, and/or when patterns emerged which begged further exploration, follow-up questions were sent by email to students via one of the university's administrators, who ensured that participants' identities were kept concealed from the researcher by using participant numbers on forwarded replies. Whilst it is acknowledged that these were not ideal conditions for ensuring anonymity, initial requests that students return responses using a 'drop' box led to them going astray. This method was therefore suggested to students who were happy with the degree of concealment it offered.

The following academic year (2008-9), the Journalism team introduced a series of four GPBL 'post-holes' run in consecutive weeks during the first semester of the core module, commencing in the third week of teaching. The problems the students were set were in order of ascending difficulty, in terms of the complexity of the scenarios and theory they were given, as well as in terms of how open-ended and multi-faceted the problems arising from it were. Their purpose was to help students develop the skills and critical thought-processes they would need for their first assessments in the Autumn term: an individually-prepared profile interview and background 'brief', which had to involve the careful choice and use of sources; and an academic essay or news-related project. They were also linked to our central aim of getting students to consider what they thought the nature and purpose of 'good' journalistic practice might be.

At the beginning of the series, material was incorporated into lectures regarding the aims and processes involved in GPBL, linking it to the professional practice of journalism, research about learning and forthcoming assessments. Students were then encouraged to form their own small working groups and spent time in seminars discussing how they wanted to handle any difficult issues that might arise, drawing up group agreements or 'ground-rules' if desired. However, given staff concerns about adopting what was perceived to be a 'high-risk strategy' less than a month into students' time with us, we decided to provide substantial 'scaffolding' in the form of weekly lectures which would outline some (but not all) of the more difficult concepts, as well offering a

selection of readings for students to explore at will, and study questions designed to prompt group discussions[6].

In order to retain the spirit of GPBL, we made it clear that these should be regarded as a 'jumping off' point for further exploration, and that the problems would be given out a week beforehand to enable groups to get going independently. Weekly seminars were then used for groups to report back on their progress and discuss any issues/ questions which had arisen. A week-by-week summary of these problems and a description of the kinds of 'scaffolding' offered to students have been included at the end of this article.

However, it should be stressed that much of the theory these students encountered during these weeks was the same as in the previous year: such as Allan's introduction to critical work on sources, which explains Hallin's sphere of deviance and Hall et al's work on 'primary definers (Allan 2004:62-76), as well as excerpts from Harcup's Journalism: Principles and Practice (2004) and Burns' Understanding Journalism (2003). The second year in this study also encountered much of the same theory outside of the GPBL 'postholes': being taught about 'news values' in the first couple of weeks on the course (Galtung and Ruge 1965; Harcup and O'Neill 2001) and going on to explore issues to do with normative theories of the media, and media ownership towards the end of the Autumn term and in the January of the Spring term. The main differences between the two years then, were that more practical texts were included as GPBL 'scaffolding' alongside academic theory, and that students had a choice about which texts to consult.

The questionnaires distributed in February 2009 were very similar to those in February 2008, using exactly the same wording for the three questions mentioned earlier. But a number of other questions were added based on the findings of the previous year. These included multiple-choice questions about when students looked at the problems and began their own research, as well as about how much independent work they did, and whether they did this alone or with peers. Open-ended questions were also added about their reasons for doing this. Finally, given the spatial terminology students used in the 2008 study, students were asked to 'draw a diagram of how you see journalistic theory and practice relating to each other (or not relating to each other)' and to 'feel free to put labels on your diagram so we can understand clearly what you have drawn.'

One potential problem with this sample was that I found the ethnic composition, educational background and grades of the 2008-9 year group were substantially different to those of the 2007-8 group - something which may be related to the slight increase in entry points. Rather than skew the study by using respondents with different profiles, I took the difficult decision to select students to match the profiles of the previous year group as closely as possible. Unfortunately, no volunteers of colour and/or with non-traditional educational backgrounds were forthcoming, so I re-advertised for participants, making it clear that all of those who were selected would be paid the minimum wage for completing the questionnaire[7]. In an effort to counter some of the concerns that have been raised in relation to participant payments (Head 2009), I repeatedly stressed to respondents that they were being paid for their time and honesty, rather than to tell me what they thought I might want to hear. Finally, in order to ensure confidentiality, I approved student payments according to participant numbers, using a recruitment agency to release cheques

First phase (2008):

The findings of this phase of the project support Windschuttle's claim that perceptions of a theory/practice split can cause Journalism students serious cognitive and motivational difficulties (2000) – but only some students. For whilst all participants in this sample responded by saying that they could not, or struggled, to see any relationship between 'doing journalism' and 'studying journalism academically', the students who did not wish to become journalists (22% of our sample) were untroubled by this, accepting the study of academic texts as an appropriate 'balance' to

6 As recommended by Armstrong (1999)

7 These payments were kindly provided by the University of Roehampton's Teaching Quality Enhancement Fund

practical work within the context of a university course.

However, those who did wish to become journalists were concerned, articulating this in terms of a 'gap' which they saw as existing between 'doing journalism' and 'studying it academically'. Interestingly, the width of this 'gap' appeared to have an inverse correlation to their level of academic achievement. So those achieving 2:1 grades or higher tended to describe the academic study of journalism as being 'slightly removed' from doing journalism, or to make allusions to there being 'a bit of distance' between the two. Those achieving 2:2 or 3rd class grades saw the separation as being much greater. Indeed, the gap appeared to 'widen' the lower students' grades got: until the lowest-achieving students of all described it as 'a f*****g great hole' and even a 'yawning chasm'.

One of the reasons why higher-achieving students may have described the 'gap' as being 'narrower' was because they seemed to suffer less distress because of it, due to their intrinsic interest in academic theory (evidenced by their use of positive emotional language about it, such as 'amazing' and 'brilliant'). In contrast, students regularly achieving under 55% did not mention any such interest. Instead, they tended to have quite intense emotional reactions to what they saw as the 'irrelevance' of academic study to their external ambition of becoming a journalist: either blaming themselves ('I must be really stupid') or their lecturers.

As Taylor has explored, a pattern of hostility and withdrawal is a common stage which students often go through as they move towards more self-directed approaches to learning. The reason for this, she claimed, was the discomfort and confusion which learners experience when their existing frame/s of reference begin to crumble, but have yet to be replaced by more thought-through paradigms of perception and meaning (1986). Boyd and Myers have also likened this process to 'grieving', with its attendant feelings of despair and rage (1988).

However, many of these students did not appear to be moving through their negative feelings towards more 'self-directed' modes of learning. Instead they seemed to have 'got stuck' in a vicious cycle of low grades, cynicism and withdrawal, adopting 'surface' 'strategic' learning approaches and/or lapsing into apathy altogether (Cassidy and Eachus 2000; Tait and Entwhistle 1996). As two wrote:

> I'll read and write about theory if it it's what gets me a degree, but I don't see the point of it beyond that. What I really want is to be a journalist and [studying Journalism academically] is only jumping through hoops really – like a little circus dog.

> [Lecturers] know that [academic theory is] not what we want to study, and it has nothing to do with becoming journalists [sic]. But they don't care – they just want to teach what they're interested in. I just can't be bothered any more...Most of the time, I don't even go [to classes]...

It might be argued that what was needed here was for tutors to engage with students' cynicism, encouraging them to reflect more thoroughly on the issues of purpose, power and control in Higher Education, so that they could move towards more satisfying forms of learning in, or outside, of the university context (Mezirow 1997: 5-12). However, these particular students would have struggled to realign their ideas about learning because of their misperceptions about Journalism. For perhaps the most striking pattern to emerge from this phase of student feedback was that, when asked about the 'processes or activities involved in doing journalism', all of the participants listed purely physical activities (like interviewing, editing broadcast pieces, presenting and using specific soft and hardware). None gave any indication that journalism involved any kinds of decision-making processes or forms of 'thinking-in-action' at all (Burns 2002: 31-48).

Second phase (2009):

The next batch of findings show that GPBL went some way towards breaking down this compartmentalization of study into 'doing' and 'thinking' categories, assisting students to move to-

wards articulating relationship/s between theory and practice, although rarely in the ways we had anticipated. Indeed, it is debatable whether our problem 'post-holes' can be defined as GPBL at all, rather than as a form of 'problem-solving', in recognition of these students' 'experienced curriculum' (Barone 1980: 29-53). For although two thirds of the sample did look at the problems before the lecture, half did not start independent research until afterwards. In addition, less than half of the sample met with their peer group outside of class-time to discuss the problem, and only three students (16% of the sample) used sources which were not 'suggested readings'.

The teaching team also noted that the 'postholes' led to a degree of inter-student conflict, which some group members were unable to solve without separating. Student responses to the questionnaires may shed some light on this, as a third of the sample said they did 'less' preparation than usual because they found it difficult to cope with the self-organization required alongside the demands of their other modules – especially assessments. So they described themselves as having become 'too busy' or having 'genuinely forgot' to meet with team-mates and/or conduct independent research. In contrast, the third who said they had done 'more' preparation than usual often wrote spontaneously about their resentment of peers whom they perceived as having 'taken advantage' of them: failing to respond to their efforts to get in contact and then arriving in class with comparatively little to contribute.

With hindsight, given the difficulties known to be experienced by first year students in adapting to even moderate forms of self-directed study, the extra strain of GPBL may have just been too much for some new undergraduates to manage outside of scheduled class-time – especially so early into their first semester. Longer-duration 'postholes' with more scheduled GPBL workshops, as well as a more direct tie to assessment, may have helped them contribute more to group-work. In addition, holding back some subject-specific resources, and adding in more 'scaffolding' to support group-work, might have encouraged more self-directed learning. Either way GPBL - as this team of novices attempted to implement it - did not always lead to simultaneous social/academic integration. Indeed, staff wondered whether the degree of inter-student conflict involved may actually have hindered, rather than helped, some students' transition into university life.

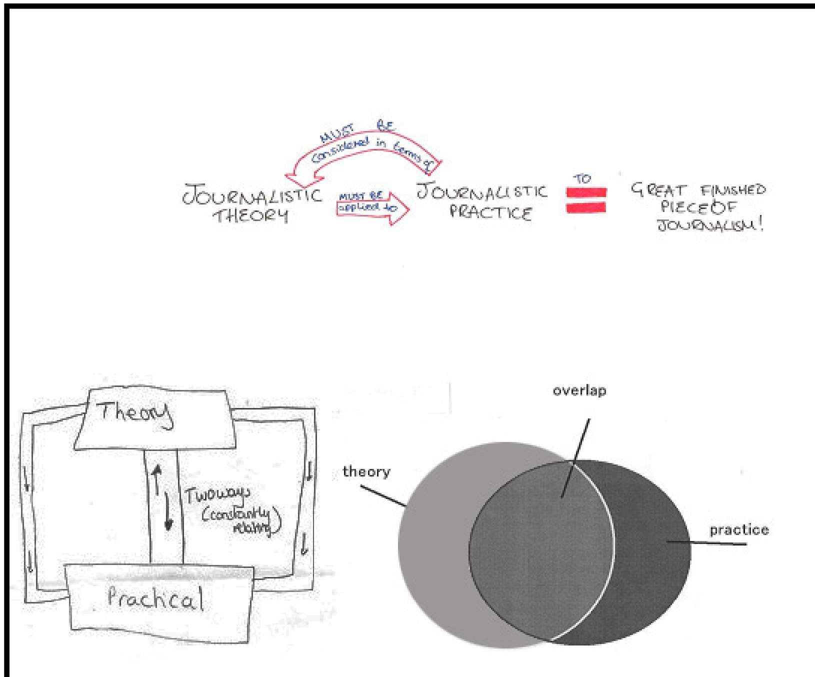
But in spite of these difficulties, the 'post-holes' seemed to have had some significant benefits. For although a far greater proportion of the 2009 sample said that they had chosen to take the course because they wanted to become journalists (94%), perceptions of a 'gap' between 'doing journalism' and 'studying journalism academically' vanished from students' response sheets - along with the cynicism, anger and disenchantment with academic learning which had accompanied it in 2008. This appeared to be associated with a shift in student perceptions of the 'processes and activities involved in 'doing journalism', as over half of the 2009 sample mentioned a 'thinking' process – most commonly the need to research a story thoroughly. Indeed, many students were insistent on this point, detailing several different kinds of research, such as: fact-checking, investigating context, and finding out about target audience/s. Accompanying this was evidence of students' growing understanding of editorial decision-making, as about a third also cited the need to engage in selecting, analyzing and evaluating thought-processes: one student even wrote about the need to 'continually question oneself and one's sources'.

Something of a virtuous circle seems to have started, with even lower-achieving students' reporting a new-found persistence and intrinsic interest in 'thinking about journalism' . This, in turn, seems to have been associated with perceptions of a closer relationship between 'doing journalism' and 'studying it academically' , as most respondents described the two as being closely related, using phrases like 'overlapping' or working 'hand in hand'. One participant achieving 3rd class grades elaborated on this:

> The journalistic problems helped me understand what the lecture was teaching [sic] … It [sic] made the theory understandable. But learning the theory also allows us to better understand the practice, as we understand the processes involved.

Accordingly, the spatial patterns which most respondents described in relation to 'theory' and 'practice' changed from those associated with a 'gap', to those associated with more of a 'flow' in

a closed loop, or to a Venn diagram with a substantial degree of overlap. See diagram below for example.



However, although these students seemed to have moved past the total disconnect experienced by the 2008 sample, the relationships they articulated between theory and practice were not as indicative of 'deep learning' as might have been hoped. In particular, students achieving lower than 55% tended to remain, at best, at the mid-way point of Säljő's scale: that is, acquiring facts, skills and methods that can be retained and used as necessary (1979:443-51.)

Indeed, they even conceptualised 'theory' - and its role in relation to 'practice' - solely in terms of its function in assisting them to achieve this end. As two students gaining low 2:2 and 3rd class marks wrote:

> I can clearly see that the theory relates [to practice]. The theory told me what I needed to do and how to go about it.

> Theory is like a step-by-step guide…Practice is like a test - if you've made too many mistakes you know that you're missing some of the basic points and need to go back and read.

Part of the reason for this narrow definition of 'theory' may lie in the study methods they used. For in the discussions which arose in my seminars, most lower-achieving students described themselves as having 'selected' or 'focused on' the 'information' they believed to be 'the most relevant' to the problem. Thus, although they had consulted some of the more accessible academic texts which contained critical arguments as well as practical guidance, they adopted reading and note-taking strategies which filtered out the critical content: 'skim-reading' to find the practical guidance 'boxes' and then 'jotting down the how-to tips'[8]. Furthermore, they disregarded study questions prompting them to consider issues of meaning: so they didn't move beyond 'what' and 'how' questions towards any reflection on 'why' journalists do what they do - let alone whether they might like to do things differently.

Therefore although perceptions of a total disconnection between theory and practice can be seen to be highly demotivating for students, perceptions of a 'close' relationship between the two does not necessarily indicate a greater degree of critical awareness. These students' 'surface' approaches may have been caused, in part, by our inexpert implementation of GPBL, but they may

8 This is strongly redolent of the seminal work on 'surface' study approaches explained by Marton and Saljő (1976: 4-11)

have also arisen from students' own 'framing' of their learning experience according to dominant discourses in society about the nature of education and/or Journalism.

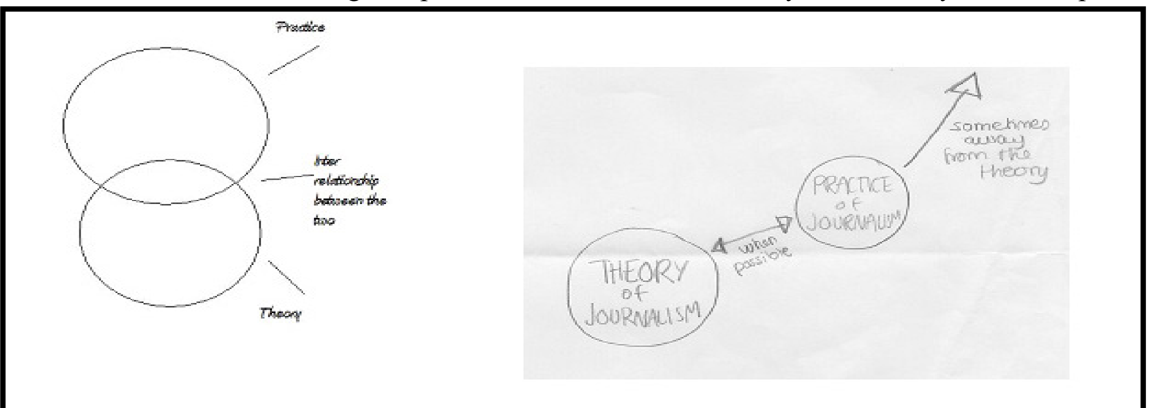
As such, they present tutors with what Jacobsen calls a 'democratic paradox': for what can you do when students, given the comparative freedom of GPBL, choose to reproduce existing norms (2004)? How much steering towards 'why' questions can tutors do before they make a mockery of the student-centered philosophy of Problem-Based Learning, even in its modified, more heavily guided form? Finally, it is worth noting that Clark's work (1982) offers evidence to suggest that although students tend to enjoy more permissive styles of teaching (and might therefore register higher levels of 'satisfaction' with their course), lower-ability students may not learn as much as they do from directive methods. This is because low-ability students seem to believe that permissive methods require less effort to get the same kinds of results - and act accordingly. In contrast, Jacobsen argues that higher-achieving students tend to learn more from permissive methods, because they don't replicate teaching/learning patterns which they have already mastered.

Few students in this study achieved 2:1s or higher, but those who achieved over 55% certainly seemed to benefit far more from GPBL, relating what they read and did in ways that seemed redolent of both 'reflection-in-action' and 'reflection-on-action'. Two (11% of the sample) used specific academic works to put their own journalistic work into context and/or to question their assumptions, as recommended by Burns (2004):

> I think now we have covered the theory, it is easy to see that journalism isn't just journalism. Ideas like news values make journalism what it is today. But these values have changed over time and will probably change again. It's interesting to have in the back of your head when you're writing a news story – where is it going to go next?

I can think of good examples [of theory relating to practice] – like Hallin's deviance theory... although I didn't consciously think about it [when writing my article], when I collated my sources later, I could really see an influence.

A further four (22% of the sample), achieving marks across a similar range, appeared to have a nascent understanding that the kinds of knowledge prized in academic theory and journalistic practice might be different, and that this could cause some friction between the two. These respondents repeatedly stressed phrases like 'reading helps, but it can be different in practice': citing the importance of context-specific judgements ('each story is an individual [sic]'), the need to think flexibly ('on your feet'), as well as being willing to bend or break 'the rules' of genre in order to achieve something remarkable – descriptions of journalistic knowledge which bear a striking similarity to those discussed by critics (Niblock 2007: 25-6). Accordingly, the spatial diagrams these students produced tended to indicate a more 'distant' or complex relationship between theory and practice, such as Venn diagrams indicating only a moderate degree of overlap, or 'flow' models with arrows indicating that practice sometimes leads 'away' from theory. For example:



Indeed, three students said they wished that they could 'prove theories wrong' using their own (and/or other practitioners') experience, although they had not tried to put any of these arguments into a university assessment – even though assessments were designed to stimulate students' con-

sideration of different ways of inter-relating theory and practice. The first reason respondents gave for that they thought they 'wouldn't have enough word count' to include much about practitioners' (including their own) experiences as well covering the minimum number of academic sources required by the university.

The second – and perhaps more significant - reason was their difficulty in finding an appropriate register with which to address the issue, without making their work sound 'less academic and more of a review'. Such an observation shows admirable self-awareness, because although these participants showed a promising inclination towards independent thinking and 'deep learning' - 'relating parts of the subject matter to each other and to the real world' (Saljő 1979:443-51) as well as engaging in meta considerations about the nature of learning - they clearly lacked the critical vocabulary with which to analyse their ideas in detail. So they fell back on unexamined clichés about the 'natural-ness' of journalistic judgement like 'gut instinct' and 'raw talent' (Niblock 2007:25).

This is not just a case of first year inexperience: the discipline itself lacks a body of research illuminating ways of critiquing specific theories using journalistic practice. As Greenberg has written:

> One gets the impression that it is the practitioners who are doing all the work in this marriage: there has been a good deal of effort to show how theory can transform the teaching of practice, but not so much that asks how practice, and the perspective of practitioners, might influence theory (2007: 295-6).

Nevertheless, since most students commencing a Journalism Studies course are doing so because they want to become practitioners, journalistic practice is bound to be central to their critical development. Thus developing appropriate critical models to 'put practice to theory' should be seen as a pedagogic, as well as theoretical, priority.

Closing Remarks:

The Journalism team at Roehampton are currently monitoring the responses of our new student intake to issues of 'theory' and 'practice' with a view to considering whether to implement GPBL at all in the first year of the single honours degree which we launched this academic year. This is because so many factors have changed for us, including a substantial increase in the number of international students who do not have English as their native language.

In addition, although our entry grades are now higher than when this study was conducted (300-340 points) and this research indicates that more able students may be able to achieve some kinds of 'deep learning' through GPBL (Clark 1982), like many other teaching teams we have come under increased pressure this year to support our colleagues in less well-recruiting subjects by taking on board additional students through 'Clearing' with lower entry grades. The prospect of implementing GPBL across the board is therefore a cause for some concern because this study indicates that even the limited independence involved in GPBL may perpetuate lower-achieving students' 'surface' study habits - preventing, rather than increasing, their exposure to alternative viewpoints. Finally, there are ongoing concerns that the group conflict involved in GPBL may hinder, rather than assist, new students' ability to integrate socially.

In short, it is fair to say that this study has created an awareness amongst the teaching team that although GPBL may help to break down some of the harmful compartmentalisation between theory and practice which goes on in Journalism Studies, it is no silver bullet. Rather, if it is used at all, it must be implemented with some caution and sensitivity in relation to particular kinds of contexts. However, positioning GPBL work later into students' first year, as well as using longer duration 'postholes', and timetabling additional workshops may lead more students to engage in questions of meaning, as well as giving more support to groups struggling to resolve their differences.

Nevertheless, it is questionable how much one can increase tutor contact time and 'coaching'

intervention whilst still remaining true to GPBL's philosophy of student-directed learning. What is clear is that, when it comes to student perceptions of the inter-relatedness of theory and practice, 'closer' is not necessarily better. Indeed, those students who perceived a much looser, and even a more fractious, relationship between the two exhibited much more sophisticated critical understandings.

Yet such relatively advanced students may also present Journalism educators with something of a problem. For whereas the limited numbers of high achieving students in this study appeared show promise in terms of 'deep learning', the impact of this on their submitted work seemed likely to be minimal, because of the unavailability of appropriate models through which they can critique specific theoretical ideas on the basis of journalistic practice, as well as vice versa. Therefore, should other Journalism teams wish to try out GPBL, they need to consider not only the timing, duration and 'scaffolding' of their 'post-holes' but also a much, much harder question: that is, how to develop the epistemology of Journalism Studies itself so that theory and practice can be inter-related in detail and on equal terms.

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Summary of GPBL problems

1/ In the first week, the theme was 'How do you check out a news story?' in which I used a modified version of a training scenario I had come across at the BBC as a working journalist. Students were asked to imagine that they were a Broadcast Assistant working for BBC London and that a loud explosion had just taken place in a house in Kingston-upon-Thames. They were given several mock-ups of wire copy as well as taped excerpts of people claiming to be eye witnesses, some of whom were speculating about terrorist attacks and linking their fears about such attacks to the numbers of immigrants who had recently moved to the area. The problem the students were given was to decide what to report about the explosion and how they would go about researching this from their office with access to a phone and a computer.

The 'scaffolding' students were given included readings on 'The Rise of 'Objective' Newspaper Reporting' (Allan 2004:7-24); 'Journalism as Decision-Making' (Burns 2003: 31-48); 'Researching a Story' (Frost 2002:24-47); and a hyperlink to the BBC's own Editorial Guidelines on 'Accuracy'. They were also given a series of 'thought prompt' questions to get them thinking and talking about the problem. These included: 'What facts can I report?'; 'Which sources should I use?'; 'What is meant by 'objectivity' and 'impartiality?'; and 'How might these ideals relate to my other questions about this problem?'

2/ In the second week, the theme was 'Introducing Journalistic Ethics'. I used an adapted version of a scenario in Burns' book (2002:49-62), asking students to envisage that they were working for a local Roehampton-based newspaper and that they had overheard two people talking on a bus. The gist of this conversation was that a youth group which meets in the community hall adjoining a local park is out of control, and that the group spills noisily into the park and the members take illegal drugs there. The conversationalists agreed that decent people are afraid to go to this area of the park at night and the police don't seem to be doing much about it.

The problem the students were set was to think through what, if anything, they wanted to do about what they had heard. They were told they had access to a phone, a computer and a travel card for public transport within London.
The 'scaffolding' they were given included reading on 'Why Journalism Matters' (Harcup 2007a:10-21); 'Where Do Good Stories Come From?' (Randall 2007:31-41); 'Balance' (Wilson 1996:43-5); as well as the hyperlinks to the Code of Conduct for the National Union of Journalists, the Press Complaints Commission and the broadcasting watchdog, OFCOM. They were also given 'thought prompt' questions, such as: 'Thinking back to the 'news values' we discussed in week 2 of the course: would what these people have said news for a local Roehampton-based newspaper?'; 'Can I quote the people I overheard?; 'What facts might I need to find out?'; 'How would I do this?; 'What do the codes of conduct relevant to my news outlet tell me about what I need to do and to avoid in this instance?' and ' Are journalistic codes of conduct important, and if so, why?'
3/ In the third week, the theme was 'Preparing for Interviews'. Students were asked to imagine that they were working for the popular music magazine, NME, and that their Editor had asked them to do a profile piece on Elephant Man, a Jamaican dance/reggae star who had been criticised by gay groups for writing lyrics they believed were homophobic. The 'peg' was that Elephant Man would be playing his first gig in the UK for some time next week The problem they were set was to decide upon, and carry out, the research they would need to prepare a pre-interview brief – the template for which was provided as a kind of 'scaffolding'.
The other scaffolding they were given was the following reading on 'Interviewing' (Harcup 2007b:127-139); 'Chasing the quotes' (McKay 2000: 96-105); 'Profiles and Celebrity Interviews' (Phillips 2007:155-184); and an Introductory piece about the philosophical tensions between advocating free speech and preventing hate speech (Wolfson 1997:1-8). They were also given 'thought prompt' questions, including: 'What do I need to find out about Elephant Man and why he has been accused of homophobia?'; 'How am I going to do that?'; 'Who do I need to talk to and why?'; 'What is an 'angle?' ; What is my 'angle' on this story?'; How does this relate to what a 'profile' is and the kinds of work usually published in my magazine?'; 'What questions might I ask?' and 'What might the consequences be of my approach?' Finally they were told they had access to a phone, a computer and a car.
4/ In the fourth week, the theme was 'Returning to News Sources: Considering the Impact of What you Do'. Students were told to imagine that they were journalists working for the website of the Wharf newspaper, which covers Canary Wharf and the Docklands area in London – an area where a lot of big financial companies are based in this area. They were told that their Editor had asked them to cover a major international conference being held at the premises of Citigroup, about how the banking industry can improve its public image.
Most of the time, students were told they were inside the conference building, listening to speakers from different financial institutions. But during a break they went outside for some fresh air, and saw what seemed to be a fight between some of the anti-globalisation protestors who had been demonstrating outside the conference and some of the police who had formed a cordon around the entrance to Citigroup's offices. Students were told that security officers ushered them back inside for their own safety, and later when they managed to get out the commotion seemed to be over. The problem they were set was to decide what to do next, and what kind of story they wanted to pitch to their Editor.
They were told they had a phone, a computer and a travel card for public transport within London. They were also given reading as 'scaffolding', including work on 'A hierarchy of credibility' which includes a discussion of Hallin's theories on deviance and Hall et al's work on 'primary definers' (Allan 2004:62-76); 'Journalism and its Critics (McNair 1999:28-43) and 'Sources and Journalists' (Gans 1980:116-203; Keeble, 2001:41-60). In addition, they were given 'thought prompt' questions including: ''What are the implications of who I interview and which facts I use as regards power?'; 'Am I treating one or more sources as more credible than other sources?'; ' If so, is that a good idea?; How does this link in to the journalistic ideals of 'impartiality', 'objectivity' and/or 'balance?' ; 'How might I respond to some of these criticisms of journalism, in my approach to this particular story?'