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Class acts: putting creativity to work

Catherine Darby, University of Central Lancashire

Abstract

What does the next generation of professional journalists need? Multimedia skills aside, the core requirements are employability and creativity. The challenge lies in incorporating these into an academic qualification. The Masters in Magazine Journalism at the University of Central Lancashire offers its postgraduate students the option of researching, creating and critiquing individual, original 68-page magazines. In partnership with academic asses-

sors, industry editors and publishers blind second mark the students' magazine projects according to set criteria. Experts thus assess creativity within an academic framework and potential employers are provided with a professional seal on a coursework showcase of students' abilities. This study explains and reflects on what the assessment criteria were and how they were developed, based on identifying and targeting genres. It tracks how the projects' pedagogical path changes students' mindsets from that of consumers to producers, yielding valuable reflections about that journey. It examines what has been learned from this joint academic and industry process about enhancing creativity assessment in a way that meets pedagogical goals in tandem with graduate and industry needs.

Introduction

In a medium where, according to the Periodicals Training Council (PTC), 98% of new entrants have a degree and over half (58 per cent) a journalism qualification, a Masters with a core magazine project harnessing reader engagement can be a driver for employability. And beyond the college environment, for an industry that seeks new, original, individual ideas to engage readers, what better than to involve employers from such a high-ratio HE industry in the assessment process?

The first Masters in Magazine Journalism in the UK was set up in 2004 to complement an existing palette of Masters courses, newspaper, broadcast and online, offered by the journalism department at the University of Central Lancashire and as such fitted into an already well-developed structure. The pioneering MA Online, launched in 1999, offered the third semester option of a project to set up a business client's website.

For their MA triple-weighted module in Semester Three, as with its peer courses, students are offered the choice of a dissertation or a project. To date, all but one student has chosen and completed the project, attracted by the challenge it poses and the personal achievement upon its completion. In the five years it has been offered, the project itself has evolved to refine its assessment procedures and incorporate industry and academic developments.

Assessment and employability

Governments require a highly educated workforce to drive the economy, even more so in a recession, placing pressure upon Higher Education to make graduates fit for purpose in the workplace.

In recruiting to specific graduate-level jobs, employers are looking for graduates and diplomates who possess high-level skills, knowledge and appropriate personal attributes, and who can ‘grow’ the job or help transform the organisation. (The Higher Education Academy Learning and Employability Series I, Pedagogy for Employability: 5).

The demand for employability is not incompatible with traditional academic values. ‘Good teaching and learning practices can serve both kinds of end, and assessment practices need to cohere with teaching and learning.’ (Knight and Yorke, 2003: vii).

This is why assessment matters and, simultaneously, why it presents a challenge.

It matters to students whose awards are defined by the outcomes of the assessment process; it matters to those who employ the graduates of degree and diploma programmes and it matters to those who do assessing. Ensuring that assessment is fair, accurate and comprehensive – and yet manageable for those doing it – is a major challenge. (Brown and Glasner, 2003: 202.)

The Holy Grail of successful assessment while developing employability is, as indicated, nothing without students achieving the first essential: learning.

Race (2007:11), identifies five principal factors underpinning successful learning:

Wanting: motivation, interest, enthusiasm

Needing: necessity, survival, saving face, gaining a sense of ownership of the intended learning outcomes.

Doing: practice, repetition, experience, trial and error.

Feedback: other people’s reactions, seeing the results.

Digesting: making sense of what has been learned.

In Race’s terms wanting and needing are the motivation; doing is “at the heart of any good course”, feedback “keeps the learning moving”. Digesting – “all experienced tutors know how important it is to give students the time and space to make sense of their learning and to put it into perspective” (12). Best practice assessments, therefore, should seek to meet the five factors of successful learning while rising to the challenge of what is required for employability. This is the attraction of a project, which also provides employers with a showcase of students’ knowledge and skills.

The Masters in Magazine Journalism’s project promotes and enhances the student learning experience by demonstrating all their acquired research and reflective knowledge and practical skills in striving to produce a project to a professional standard which engages their targeted reader. As such it is also a platform for their individual interests, enhancing their employability and reflecting the diversity of their backgrounds and interests, from *DesiGirl* (for teenage British Asian girls) to *Go!* (a glossy for disabled women), from *BBC6* (a magazine for fans of a music radio station) to *Exhibit* (focussing on North West arts and culture).

Learning Factor 1: Wanting

What the Masters’ project criteria are, how they were drawn up and why they work: the methodology.

The project runs over the three months of Semester Three and has three assessments. The first is the proposal, based upon original research, submitted at the beginning of the semester. The second is the 68-page magazine dummy, house style guide and media pack and the third is a self-analytical critique of the student’s journey to launch, both due at the end of the semester.

The first assessment, the proposal, sets out the student’s stall for the existence of their magazine project. Based upon Johnson and Prijatelj’s business plan brief in *The Magazine From Cover to Cover* (1999: 139) it now also reflects the entry criteria for the PTC Magazine Academy competition as mirroring what the industry itself would require. In this criteria the student pitches for a

new consumer, business or even contract magazine by examining the current market, competition and potential reader demand to justify the newcomer's existence. The pitch should include:

A sample front cover communicating its core brand proposition to its reader.

Title – “a good title positions the magazine and it does so with as few words as possible. It is short, direct and clear.” (139).

Magazine Type – B2B, consumer, contract, in-house or specialist

A mood board. This encapsulates who the magazine is for and what it does for them.

Editorial Philosophy - “An editorial philosophy explains what the magazine is intended to do, what areas of interest it covers, how it will approach those interests and the voice it will use to express itself. It is highly specific.” (139). Kinds of articles, other content planned and its relationship to its “website” (for workload reasons, this is purely academic not an additional practical construction).

Audience – Demographics using research methods and/or focus groups to crystallize the reader profile.

Competitor analysis – who are the other players in the market?

Circulation – including frequency and means of distribution.

Advertising – who are the target advertisers and what advantages would the magazine offer?

Manufacturing – to indicate production values such as paper category.

How will you keep your readers coming back? And acquire new readers?

Once assessed on four, equally weighted, criteria (content, structure, writing style and originality) students are given feedback which helps to position their magazines ahead of the three months they have to produce them. The proposal is then modified according to their magazine's development and resubmitted as the media pack for the second assessment, the dummy magazine itself, with a house writing and design style which encapsulates the reader's voice. By identifying and targeting their genres, it challenges the students' mindset as consumers and sets them on the road to production.

The beauty and singularity of this first assignment is that the student is setting their own assessment criteria, the media pack, for the second: does the product match up to the pitch?

This assessment meets the first criteria of Race's successful learning criteria: wanting. It is critical that the student selects an area they are interested in to generate the enthusiasm needed to motivate them to complete a task that will dominate three months of their lives. This is where individual consultation with course tutors before the pitch helps to draw out what the student wants to do. Even before the student arrives on the course, they are asked to conceptualise a magazine. They are given feedback on this which they can reflect on and take forward as their magazine project or, if understanding during the course that it would not be viable, consider alternative options.

For example, a student's initial brief was for a careers magazine for female postgraduates. But six months down the line she realised that she wanted to move on from being a student, other postgraduates might feel the same and the subject was just too niche. Asked what subject she was really interested in, she said simply 'cakes - and puddings'. Having identified this as a driving interest, research uncovered that there was no magazine solely catering for her and fellow cake-lovers and no magazine that did not induce calorie-counting guilt. This motivation led to her project magazine *Indulge*, tagline *Bake Your Cake and Eat It Too*, which not only achieved a Distinction but also won the PTC Magazine Academy award for Original Concept in 2007.

In teaching and tutorials, students learn the hard commercial imperative that wanting to write about film, celebrity, music, for instance, is very different from discovering whether there is a genuine need for another magazine in that genre. Students also learn how they might 'spin' their offering to fill even a tiny gap in the market. It is this professional knowledge and experience that gives students the edge and makes them consider their choices of topic more carefully, sometimes leading them into innovation. So it is a considered wanting, based on teaching and learning. It is

also an objectified wanting, not subjective, which introduces academic and industry rigour.

The editor of Backboard magazine, for British basketball fans of whom he is one, found this the attraction. He said magazine readers are constantly analysing what is read on a subconscious level, and buying a publication depends on those judgements made while reading it. 'The challenge comes in making these judgements conscious and knowing why you think what you do. This is the first step in becoming a producer rather than a consumer – by effectively analysing what is already there and what you've previously done you can learn, improve and adapt, thereby improving what you produce in the future.' Hence he created a pull-out guide, more work for him but targeted at creating a community for his readership, which was also possible given the number of pages in the dummy.

Consulting the magazine's targeted readership is also formative in turning students from a consumer to a producer. Getting feedback from their target audience makes them evaluate what their readers want rather than what they would prefer themselves and thereby sets the agenda for the magazine's content and features.

Learning factors 2, 3, 4 & 5: needing, doing, feedback and digesting

'Assessment should enable the demonstration of excellence. The very best students should be able to be challenged to achieve at the highest standards.' (Race, 2007: 30).

The second assessment, the dummy, seeks to give students this platform to stretch themselves to produce a project to a professional standard as a complete magazine, not a series of separate feature pieces. This is why it is set at 68 pages with 40% advertising which brings the number of editorial pages to 41. To demonstrate students' editing skills, ten per cent of the work may be commissioned.

This particular assessment was drawn up within two frameworks: practically, in consultation with industry expert and publisher Sally O'Sullivan and academically, with the assessment based on the structure of dissertations with the first marker as supervisor and the dummy magazine blind marked by the second marker. The process has since been refined to team tutorials of the three first academic markers who have extensive industry experience offering panel tutorials for each student. As in best practice for dissertations, a log charts students' progress at each one.

What is particularly innovative about this assessment is that the magazines themselves are now second marked by industry editors interested in the academic process and bringing real world experience to bear in judging creativity. They are guided by clear assessment criteria on a sliding scale, using the media pack and the third assessment, the student's critique, for background information. The final mark for the dummy is negotiated between first and second marker in an email debate that may refer to the tutorial log during moderation. The agreed conclusion is ultimately returned to the student along with the feedback and final mark to see how it was arrived at. If required, a third arbitrator would be an academic.

This second assessment meets the outstanding requirements of successful learning: needing, doing, feedback and digesting. The formative tutorial system offers an academically monitored safety net while giving students ownership of the intended learning outcomes. Mandatory attendance (necessity) galvanises students to save face by producing evidence in working dummies of moving on between each one. In their own experience, learning by doing and through trial and error, issues and challenges are brought to the table where students can see other people's reactions and explore alternative channels.

For example, a celebrity interview central to their magazine's readers' expectations has fallen through, not least as student coursework is low on the agenda of celebrities and their PRs. Working through alternatives with tutors such as a different story angle or treatment (for example a photo essay instead of a word portrait) helps the student keep control of their project and develop

the lateral thinking needed to put themselves in their readers' shoes to find a suitable replacement feature. Moving from consumer to producer, what would their readers expect to find in their magazine? And what will it take to provide it? This demonstrates their knowledge and application of different journalistic genres.

Each tutorial builds upon making sense of what has been learned, feeding forward to students and their careers in the industry. This is put into perspective by the third assessment of a self-critiquing analysis.

Setting appropriate assessment criteria is critical, however, particularly for a product seeking to be of a professional standard.

In assessing the quality of a student's work or performance, the teacher must possess a concept of quality appropriate to the task, and be able to judge the student's work in relation to that concept. (Sadler, 1989:119.)

Methodology for marking the student magazines

When it came to marking the dummies themselves, with all the nuances of magazinecraft, it made sense to involve industry practitioners as second markers rather than fellow academics who may not have specialist knowledge of that section of the media unlike the three team tutors who have all worked in it. In the first year of trialling this, 2005, the methodology was tested with publisher Sally O'Sullivan on four project magazines, including one which was the real-world launch of a Manchester edition of lifestyle magazine *Your Quarter*.

The marking guidelines were then drawn up and issued as an assessment pack to second markers, with previous examples. The priority in assessing the magazine is how it succeeds from the communication point of view on four criteria, each weighted equally at 25 per cent:

In terms of its Content, does it meet the interests, expectations, aspirations of the targeted reader? On the sliding scale of assessment first class work, for example, will be consistently well targeted and demonstrate a high level of lateral thinking and originality, making it most suitable for publication. At the other end of the scale, anything that is unpublishable, contains serious lapses of judgement or serious errors is a failure.

The following three criteria are marked to equivalent levels.

Does the level of Writing match the genre?

Does the Design match the genre?

Has the Package delivered on the promise of its media pack with pace and a clear editorial voice? Are the appropriate adverts placed without detriment to editorial? Bearing in mind the drawbacks of a student publication, credit must be given on how they have achieved exclusivity (such as celebrities, philosophers and rock stars) against odds not encountered by professional publications.

This assessment has two overall aims: that the magazine communicates clearly within its genre delivering the goods to a targeted readership and that the student has achieved the best outcome they can as a non-professional within the scope of an academic framework.

There are two further refinements in what is expected to be a continuing development of this process. First, students know that their projects will be second marked by industry editors but are not told who their markers are so they don't work (consciously or subconsciously) to the interests or expectations of one person. Therefore they will focus all the more on their product and their reader not on the marker.

Second, a disparity of greater than five overall marks between the academic first and industry second markers in two of the projects (neither of them to the detriment of their final mark) does address what is a core challenge of coursework for employability: that these projects are a creative package not a real-life commercial pitch. As part of preparing the students for world of work the MA course teaches them to understand the business of journalism but the distinction must be

clearly made within the academic framework that students must achieve subject journalism learning outcomes not subject business learning outcomes. To that end the Package criteria has been clarified that the product meets the criteria set out by its own media pack not that of an industry-led pitch.

The third and final assessment, marked by the module leader, is the reflective critique of their project experience, digesting what they have learned. Based upon the principles of a SWOT analysis, it should include: current industry research, a prospectus for the launch's future development and an analysis of how the project developed with a comparison of what was achieved to the original stated aims. It is marked as Assignment One on the four, equally weighted criteria of content, structure, writing style and originality. In chronicling and analysing the journey to launch, students measure how much they have learned and make sense of the experience.

From the students' perspective an integral part of this was arriving at the understanding of the difference between being a consumer and a producer.

As the editor of *Bounce*, a magazine for family fitness, commented:

I learnt that to make a good magazine, you can aim it at people like yourself, but to make a great magazine, you need to separate yourself from the equation and write for others.

The link between an academic project and successful learning was summed up by the editor of cultural travellers' magazine *Monument*, who spoke of his 'pride that it is the realisation of not just three months' work but of a whole year's education'.

Industry comment

This innovation was expanded for the cohort of 2007/08 courtesy of the Periodicals Training Council who invited volunteers from the industry. So the students of 2008/09 had their magazines marked by editors from the BBC, *Today's Golfer*, Reed Business Information, Archant, Future Publishing, Business Insider and Peter Baistow, a guest speaker and the retired associate design director of the *Sunday Times* and colleague of the legendary Harold Evans. Students can hardly better learning from and referring to a critique of their work from such sources when they apply for employment within the same industry.

Peter Baistow enjoyed "being in touch with the next generation of journalists and seeing what they are about". He felt the benefit of industry second markers brought "a degree of reality to a project that must not be trapped in its own vacuum". Andrew Calton, of *Today's Golfer*, said that it helped him to understand students' creativity:

It was good to see the creativity across such a wide range of disciplines from a student. It showed how young writers are encouraged to think about the entire process – from the initial idea, to the structure of the piece, the pictures and ultimately the writing. It showed how well the whole process is being taught and understood. How students can visualise an idea – and I think that's really important and will help them massively when they get a job in media.

There may be immediate practical benefits too. Roger Borrell, editor of *Lancashire Life*, said in a different economic climate he would have taken his findings further. "There was at least one piece of work which, had the economy been different, I would have tried to develop into a section for one of our magazines using the skills of the student involved."

Conclusion

The PTC Original Magazine Concept in October 2009 was awarded to Wild, a children's wildlife magazine, which also pioneered the first professional publication of a student's MA coursework project by Dennis Publishing as an insert for *The Week* magazine. Wild's author Alice Lipscombe-Southwell, who started her first job in September 2009 as editorial assistant on *Paper Craft* maga-

zine as soon as she had finished the course, says 'I loved creating my own magazine, it was a lot of hard work, but the feeling of achievement and success when I handed it in and saw the finished product was unbelievable.'

There is material here for further analysis which is limited within the confines of this current platform: exploring the elements of "deep" and "surface" learning within the tutorial process and meeting the challenges of maintaining clear criteria and open lines of communication with a rapidly changing industry will mean continuing refinements to the Masters. The insights gained may also be found to transfer across to other subject area projects which call upon similar drivers of subjective creativity within an objective context. Fashion design, for example, where an original design which meets customers' desires could create a new collection, even a trend.

The Masters magazine project is based on best practice in learning and seeking to meet the challenges of assessing creativity in a way that meets pedagogical goals in tandem with graduate and industry needs. In terms of employability, it is an excellent method of promoting the students' interests and of introducing industry to an understanding of students' creativity. There are new magazine markets and audiences developing all the time and students are at the cutting edge, both as customers and as the source of ideas. The learning drivers to produce work to a professional level showcase their ideas and skills to potential employers. Editors and publishers might wish for a first bite of what they have found and the students have demonstrated that they are knowledgeable about their documented achievements and 'able to present them to putative employers in an appropriate manner'. (Assessment, Learning and Employability: 13).

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