

Working to a client brief? Offering work-based learning as a valuable addition to work experience in journalism: a case study

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Introduction

Work-based learning has become a key component of foundation degrees and in training generally. It does not seem to be commonplace in journalism education, though, where work experience remains king.

Journalism has always been about contacts, and for many journalism students, the links they make while undertaking work experience placements are key in finding that crucial first job. They also can have the opportunity to use their classroom-acquired skills in the real world. But as a journalism educator, I found that some placements – mostly in regional newspapers - offered a disappointing experience for students. They returned from short-staffed newsrooms where the expectation was that no-one went out on a story and rewriting from press releases was the norm.

Although I acknowledge that this sort of experience has value, I felt an additional type of learning would be welcome.

The work-based learning model, based as it is on a “client brief”, had always been at odds with what I considered to be real journalism but the project described below offered real value for students and forced me to re-think the work-based experience offered to journalism students.

This paper seeks to share experience of a work-based learning project delivered on a National Council for the Training of Journalists (NCTJ)-accredited print journalism course, and to offer the view that work-based learning is a valuable addition to NCTJ-accredited courses and would work equally well in undergraduate programmes.

The story begins

I was based in an FE college which offered NCTJ-accredited fast-track courses of 17 weeks and an academic year course, spanning 35 weeks. Many student were graduates, although there were some 18-year-olds and mature students with varied educational and employment experience.

The NCTJ qualification includes a portfolio of real-life news stories and features as an assessed element of its course, which required opportunities to be available for such reporting to take place. Work experience could be difficult for fast-track students to arrange during college holidays within the four-month timescale, and missing a week of college had a negative impact on other subject areas. Some students had little published work during their course.

Another of the main drivers for discussions around work-based learning was the creation and validation of a two-year Foundation Degree (FD), a number of which are on offer in journalism around the country.

The challenge is to find projects which are worthwhile and of value to students while maintaining strong links both to the world of work and the world of academia and education.

The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) for Higher Education, in its benchmark document for FDs, says authentic and innovative work-based learning is integral.

They are intended to equip learners with the skills and knowledge relevant to their employment, so satisfying the needs of employees and employers.

(<http://www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews/foundationdegree/benchmark/fdqb.asp:point 14>)

But a review of FDs carried out in 2004-5 noted:

Sustaining an effective level of employer engagement continues to present challenges for some providers. In these cases, employers' lack of involvement in regular monitoring and development, assessment practices and student feedback, and in their support for work-based learning, can limit the professional currency and credibility of the FDs

(<http://www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews/foundationdegree/learningfrom05/>)

The review found some programmes included live projects and simulated work-based learning, which was particularly effective when they included the typical demands of being in the workplace. Among the review's comments was that development of work-based learning experiences should ensure students undertook real tasks, rather than simply observing, and also ensure tasks related to real-world experience. There was also the recommendation that the support supplied by mentors and employers to students was monitored to ensure they all received an equivalent experience.

In discussion about how to deliver this, my college bosses often referred to the idea of students working to a "client brief" for work-based learning projects. This did not sit easily with me, as journalism has never been about writing what others want you to write. As journalist and publisher Lord Northcliffe said:

News is what somebody somewhere wants to suppress; all the rest is advertising.

Journalism is the sort of discipline where work experience has always been held up as the best way to gain crucial industry experience, often leading to a job as a trainee reporter. The NCTJ recommends a period of work experience during a course, though it is not a requirement. This was how I envisaged work-based learning being delivered.

The importance of work experience placements was highlighted in research by High Fliers, whose managing director Martin Birchall was quoted in the Guardian (2012):

Today's report includes the stark warning to the class of 2012 that, in a highly competitive graduate job market, new graduates who have not had any work experience at all during their time at university have little hope of landing a well-paid job with a leading employer, irrespective of the academic results they achieve or the university they've attended.

But work experience in newspapers has, in places, become of limited value for some students.

There is the problem of how much relevant work the student was being asked to do. As noted above, the QAA's review of work-based learning highlighted that students should be doing, not just watching.

The implosion of the regional newspaper business causing a huge number of redundancies – with Slattery (2009) reporting more than 900 regional journalists being made redundant between July 2008 and March 2009 – has often left remaining reporters with enormous workloads and little time to get out of the office. They instead churn out material from press releases and speak to contacts via email or on the phone, rather than the face-to-face interviews which journalists should be conducting. This type of work pattern – criticised as "churnalism" by Davies (2008) among others – was having a detrimental effect on students' experiences of the workplace and of what journalism is meant to be.

One student returned from a week's work experience at a weekly local newspaper saying that being a reporter was a desk job, as he had not seen reporters going out of the office. His role had been rewriting press releases throughout his time there. Another student had been asked to write a book review based on the press release and cover notes, without reading the book.

One student wrote this about her work experience:

I did a week's work experience on a local weekly paper and found that although working in a newsroom was a good experience, I found the lack of initiative and creativity quite boring. Virtually all the stories were based on press releases, all interviews were conducted over the telephone

and none of the reporters left the office. I was also surprised that there was no interaction between anyone in the office.

Clearly students needed a better work-based learning experience.

Hanney (2005) described confusion over the scope and meaning of work-based learning in a media production degree. He explained how Skillset, the Sector Skills Council for the Audio Visual Industries (2004), said learning must take place in a real world environment and not an FE or HE environment, which was at odds with the QAA guidance. And he asked the question: “How do we as educators incentivise employers to work with us within the constraints of HE institutional practices?”

This is a major issue in print journalism, where newspaper editors and staff are overwhelmed by changes and cuts in the industry and not in the best place to devote time and staff resources to work-based learning schemes.

Hanney advocates a methodology called Problem-based Learning (PBL), which focuses on the process rather than the products of learning and knowledge. He offers the example of a project which requires the production of an artefact, where the outcome is open-ended and assessment could be peer or self-assessment. The tutor supervises and facilitates and students produce their own strategies; determine their own learning, maybe within budgeted resources; form learning teams and work through problem-based scenarios together.

It (PBL) establishes a principle where capability rather than competence becomes the benchmark for success and assists us in offering the following challenges to students:

- *To engage in their own independent critical inquiry;
- *To manage their own resources;
- *To take ownership for their own learning.

(Hanney 2005)

Simmons (undated) describes running a ‘Newsweek’ for level six broadcast journalism degree students, where students pitched for roles such as producer, reporter or presenter, drew up their own rotas and produced news bulletins and programmes across the week. At the end of the week, students critiqued ten 15-minute programmes and voted for one to go forward to a panel of academic and industry judges for feedback.

She concluded:

Assessments can offer a valid work-based learning experience but still retain the academic rigour that enriches students’ learning in addition to enhancing their employment opportunities.

(Simmons undated)

Students undertake WBL

A work-based learning opportunity arose when the college’s media department was approached by the British Heart Foundation’s fundraising volunteer manager for the region. She had a plan to recruit 500 new volunteers for the area in the next 12 months and felt she could run a project with the print journalism students, as well as the photography and video production students. Her aim was to garner publicity for the campaign.

I was initially dubious about how it could work, but in a meeting with the volunteer manager and the charity’s local press officer, a trained journalist, my colleague and I came up with the idea of approaching the city’s daily paper to run a series of news stories and features written by our students.

After meeting the BHF team and lecturers, the editor was positive and gave a timescale for the campaign launch story, which would be a double page spread.

We had a small cohort of students but two-thirds of them signed up as volunteers. The project’s

value as part of the assessed portfolio was emphasised to them. The NCTJ's programme of study for the portfolio says:

The portfolio is a record of training and is intended as evidence that the candidate has undertaken a range of reporting and writing exercises, as part of coursework or during work experience, which has been assessed to newspaper standards by qualified journalist trainers.

(NCTJ 2008)

The project had a smooth start, where the press officer and I discussed the best way of splitting the launch feature into discrete parts and I divided it between two fast-track students. They were briefed and given information to turn into a news story. They were also given the contact names and numbers of two existing BHF volunteers to interview. This required a high level of skill, as both interviewees had lost husbands to heart disease a few years ago, an excellent chance to build skills in sensitive interviewing.

The system set up was that, after discussion during which students were guided into the best angle and structure for the news story, students emailed me their final version. I subbed it, checking any ambiguities or inconsistencies with students. I forwarded it to the BHF for checking on BHF guidelines, accuracy on medical facts, for example, and they submitted it to the newspaper.

The print journalism students had to liaise with photojournalism students to ensure photos were provided to go with the story. The skills they developed included checking with interviewees they were willing to have pictures taken; organising the logistics; and briefing the photographer on what the story was about, so the most appropriate photo could be taken. This very much reflects a pattern of working in a newspaper office and is invaluable real-life experience of managing an entire news story.

This approach meant students received feedback – or feedforward – as they worked when we discussed how best to approach the story, or how to phrase some tricky information or concepts. They also had the benefit of effective work-based learning, as they learned from real-life experience by seeing what final changes I, and indeed the newspaper, made before it was printed.

They also had excellent bylined cuttings of prominent new stories they could use for their portfolios and to show in future job interviews.

The charity continued to offer leads for further stories and many went well, with students reliably turning in good quality stories after gaining real-world experience of interviewing people, sometimes in difficult situations but always with willing interviewees and with a positive purpose of helping the BHF.

Problems did arise when there was a mismatch between students' professed keenness to undertake a story and the reality of doing it. In a couple of cases, there were problems with hitting deadlines. The keenest students had already volunteered for stories and it was the turn of less keen and reliable students to take on the challenge. This led to stories arriving too late to be used in a timely manner by the newspaper, and with inaccuracies which were picked up by the BHF but delayed publication. On reflection, the tight deadline on this task was a big ask for those particular students and I needed to be more mindful of the amount of support needed for them to achieve this successfully. It was, though, a real world learning experience for all involved.

The news stories published in the paper showcased our students' work and we built up a good relationship with the charity's staff, which could lead to similar projects in the future.

The student who had described the lack of creativity during her work experience said this about the project:

In comparison to work experience, the British Heart Foundation gives you a better experience of interviewing people face-to-face as well as allowing you more freedom to source the story individually. The fact that the BHF gives you the original source for the story also means that you get a gentle introduction to writing stories, rather than throwing you in at the deep end straight away.

Conclusion

Wenger (1998) wrote about a social theory of learning, “one that placed learning in the context of our lived experience of participation in the world.” (1998:3). People build up communities of practice, whether in their home life, work life or leisure time.

In spite of curriculum, discipline and exhortation, the learning that is most personally transformative turns out to be the learning that involved membership in these communities of practice. (Wenger 1998: 6)

If we acknowledge that what has come to represent the epitome of learning – a classroom or lecture theatre – is only a small part of knowing, the traditional format for learning does not look productive.

What does look promising are inventive ways of engaging students in meaningful practices, of providing access to resources that enhance their participation, of opening their horizons so they can put themselves on learning trajectories they can identify with, and in involving them in actions, discussions, and reflections that make a difference to the communities that they value.

(Ibid:10)

This project offered a better understanding of why work-based learning can and should be more than simply sitting at a desk in a workplace – and how to deliver that. It hopes to offer food for thought for journalism educators working to deliver FDs or undergraduate programmes, as well as industry-accredited pathways. This real-world journalism project offered great opportunities for students and good publicity and goodwill for the college. Not all work experience placements can say the same.

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