

Storytelling in the newsroom: An investigation into practice-based learning methods in the training and employment of tomorrow's journalists

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Abstract

In order to prepare students for a career in journalism, teaching must be done through practice-based learning. The integration of theory, practice and reflection as advocated by Kolb(1984) provides a solid pedagogical framework for courses seeking to prepare students for a career in the industry. This research looks at the experiential learning undertaken during the Broadcast Journalism Training Council's accreditation requirement of practice-based news days both at Coventry University and the University of the West of England. It found that news days had huge benefits for the students in "doing it for real". They were able to experience the pressures of being a working journalist whilst being allowed to make mistakes in a safe environment. It also shows that the incremental autonomy experienced on news days and re-

reflection sessions, incorporating theory and practice, led to a deeper level of learning for the students.

Key Words: journalism education, pedagogy, Kolb, training, simulation learning, experiential learning, practice-based learning, news days.

Introduction:

What is the best way to teach journalism at Higher Education level to prepare students for a career in the industry?

The Broadcast Journalism Training Council (BJTC), the industry accreditation body, requires that all accredited courses include 'news days' in their teaching. A news day is a hybrid of simulation and experiential learning where students become practising journalists. Whilst the purpose of those days is clear, that students should learn to become journalists by working to a real live brief or deadline driven day, there has been no research regarding the best way of achieving that aim and how the students perceive them.

BJTC Requirements stipulate that a news day must be a minimum of six hours long, should start with a news meeting, setting the agenda and culminate in the creation of an up to date bulletin, and/or a magazine of fresh and re-versioned stories as appropriate to intended audience and platforms of transmission (BJTC, 2015). Current guidelines advise:

"...a minimum of 15 news days a year for a course of up to a year and for longer courses there must be a minimum of 15 days per academic year, the exception being the first year of a course where students should have ample workshop opportunity to acquire the skills and knowledge in all the various elements of a news production day. (BJTC, 2015, p11)

This evolving form of news media pedagogy is being undertaken on 70 courses in the UK at 40 different institutions and has implications on the changing priorities for the education, training and employment of tomorrow's journalists. While this industrial news production model of pedagogy is backed by industry, academics have asked how valuable it is in the changing world of journalism (Mensing, 2010 and 2011).

This research, encouraged by the BJTC, addresses this knowledge gap by using qualitative data from students at the University of the West of England (UWE), Coventry University, both BJTC accredited courses, and former UWE students now working in the journalism industry. It draws upon the experiential learning literature of Kolb (1984) and others more specifically concerned with journalism education (Steel et al, 2007) who have called for further study in this area.

At the University of the West of England news days have been integrated into the modular teaching structure. Students undergo a series of workshops to learn the basic skills for six weeks and then put them into practice through news days in the final six weeks of both semesters. At level one, students learn basic TV and radio newsgathering skills. At level two the broadcast skills are increased considerably and mobile reporting and editing is introduced and at level three news days focus on tri-media: radio, TV and online. Students rotate through a number of newsroom roles including reporters, news editors or producers, presenters, bulletin editors, gallery director and forward planners aimed at giving them a feel for all the roles in the newsroom and how they integrate together.

Similarly, news days at Coventry University are designed around an incremental approach allowing students to gradually learn the skills needed throughout the three years and progressively ramping up the requirements. At level one they focus on radio and online skills with news days integrated into the module and then building up to a full week at the end of the second term. At level two news days progress to include TV and are integrated at a modular level followed by a week at the end of term one and another at the end of term two. For level three students, news days are based around future ways of working and are multi-platform, video, audio and words all produced for emerging online formats, including social media.

At both universities, as the students progress through the course the level of autonomy is increased and the scaffolds around learning are gradually removed.

Context:

The pedagogical theoretical framework for these courses is Kolb's experiential learning cycle (Kolb, 1984). The learning cycle draws upon four main bases that the learner must engage with: concrete experience; reflective observation; abstract conceptualisation, active experimentation and then the cycle returns to concrete experience. It builds on the premise that practice will be adjusted based upon the reflection and the theory building. The learner can engage with the cycle at any stage. Kolb drew upon earlier work by John Dewey, Jean Piaget and Kurt Lewin. All start with the premise that experience is essential to the experiential learning process and that it is possible to integrate theory and practice through reflection.

Brandon (2002) said that experiential learning could open new areas of knowledge for journalism education as well as helping to improve courses for students. She called for studies in this area to include news editorial employees of newspapers, news editorial employees of television and educators in print and broadcast journalism, as well as students enrolled in courses. She wanted to discover whether courses addressed students' career aspirations, encouraged initiative, offered training that would lead to different job positions, allowed input, used mistakes as learning opportunities, provided frequent feedback on performance and encouraged the use of knowledge gained in other learning settings (Brandon 2002, p65). Some of these areas are addressed in this research.

In May 2005 Steel et al embarked on a study with 50 post-graduate journalism students and eight post-graduate students of political communication in the Department of Journalism Studies at the University of Sheffield. They undertook a one-off real-time newsgathering exercise to cover the general election producing material for TV, radio, newspapers and the internet. They worked as "real" journalists reporting and analysing the results. Students were interviewed afterwards to elicit their responses to the experiment. They categorised their findings into five themes: Anxiety, confidence, group organisation, convergence, doing it for real – managing the pressure.

Steel et al raised questions about how "educators manage the balance between throwing students in at the deep end so that they resolve problems and learn through doing, yet on the other, still retaining sufficient control to guarantee that they experience a positive and productive outcome." (2007, p.333). This research adopts a similar methodology to Steel et al and attempts to answer some of the questions posed.

They called for further research by journalism educators into "the practice of teaching journalism in all its aspects." (2007, p.332). In particular, they called for research which would critically examine approaches to learning and teaching convergence, the relationship between academic content and practical components, in particular how scholars can relate theory and practice. They also called for further empirical research into experiential learning in journalism and for it to be a central component of journalism studies.

A similar study, two years later by Kartveit from the Danish School of Media and Journalism, examines Kolb's learning cycle as a pedagogic approach in practical journalism training (Kartveit, 2009). This work concluded that experiential learning offers a comprehension setting of how practical journalism training can be implemented and has great potential for learning at several levels (2009, p.46). Greenberg (2007) also looked at Kolb's experiential learning cycle in journalism education but as a solution to the theory-practice divide that has developed as journalism practitioners continue to enter the academic world. She concluded that practitioners would gain value by engaging with theory to give the experiential learning cycle the chance to explore its fullest potential and that theory-based disciplines should look at alternative theoretical frameworks and examine their own response to feedback from practice (2007, p.302).

Integrating theory into practice is one of the main components of the news days at the University of the West of England. Following the transmission of the programme and publication of the web material there is a detailed feedback session which asks students to reflect on the theory and practice of the day's activities. The researcher was particularly interested in how this is perceived by students. The news day experience however, is predominantly driven by the BJTC guidelines and achieving the accreditation requirements and list of journalism skills which are entirely practice-based and do not include critical reflection. It relies upon an industrial news production model and the creation of a simulated newsroom environment. This kind of journalism education has been welcomed by those with backgrounds in industry but critiqued by others. The call to reinvent journalism education is not new. (Dennis, 1984, Medsger, 1996, Reese, 1999, Reese and Cohen, 2000, Carey, 2000, Adam, 2001, MacDonald, 2006, and Deuze, 2006, all cited in Mensing, 2011). Mensing (2010& 2011) calls for journalism schools to consider alternatives to the transmission-driven in-

dustrial model and advocates a re-alignment with democracy and community. Zelizer, 2004, points to the accreditation standards shaping the curriculum of journalism schools and, like Greenberg, describes a rift between journalism educators and scholars.

Little research has been done on student perceptions of news days but recent discussion at the Association of Media Practice Academics in Birmingham (2015) suggested a growing interest in how these days are perceived both by students and academics.

This research attempts to analyse the usefulness of courses based on experiential learning models, by asking students about their experiences and perceptions of the courses. It pays particular attention to the role of reflection, both in a practical and theoretical context using data from student experiences and perceptions.

Methodological approach:

The research uses a series of focus groups and semi-structured interviews with journalism students at the University of the West of England (UWE) and Journalism and Media students at Coventry University, both BJTC accredited courses. It also uses data from a semi-structured group interview with three former students of Journalism from the UWE now working in the journalism industry.

Twenty participants took part in the study overall. Four focus groups were held in Coventry with undergraduate students, ten first years, four second years and one third year. One semi-structured group interview was conducted at the University of the West of England with two third year students. The three former UWE students were all working as video journalists and had graduated the previous year (2014). The aim was to ascertain whether the practice-based skills and experiential style of learning had enabled them to secure roles in industry as journalists, what about news days they found useful if at all and how they had used reflection to improve their practice.

Participants were invited to take part via emails to all students in their year groups. Their participation was self-selecting so has a subjective effect on the results as those who enjoy news days are more likely to volunteer to take part in a research focus group about them. This was kept in mind when analysing the data.

Questions were designed to build upon the work done by Steel et al (2007) in earlier research into experiential learning in journalism whereby qualitative reflective responses were elicited. It was decided that in order to be able to draw comparisons or contrasts and also to attempt to answer some of the questions that it poses in its call for further research, a similar model needed to be applied.

Initial questioning focused on what students enjoyed and didn't enjoy about news days and how, if at all, they felt they were preparing them for industry. In response to earlier focus groups, follow-up questions were developed for later groups along the lines of reflection on practice, the link between theory and practice, being "thrown in at the deep end" and the balance between student autonomy and lecturer involvement in news days.

The focus groups/interviews were audio recorded. They were then transcribed and coded into themes for analysis. Analysis was done using grounded theory involving the construction of theory through the analysis of data (Glaser and Strauss, 1967 cited Croucher and Cronn Mills, 2015) using a combination of both approaches.

Themes were broadly identified using Owen's steps for analysing transcripts; recurrence, repetition and forcefulness (Owen 1984 cited in Croucher and Cronn- Mills, 2015,200). Topics that occurred in more than one group or by more than one person in the same group were identified as themes.

Findings & Discussion:

A wide range of themes emerged of which four were identified as recurring. These will be discussed below. Analysis will be given and examples of student responses included to back up the themes.

Doing it for real – getting hands on:

This was the most prevalent of the themes to emerge from the research with 12 references to the concept of doing the job for real.

Students at both universities and those now working in journalism reported positive experiences to actually doing it under real time constraints.

...it represents how it would be in the real world, like, if you were to be on ITV, BBC or any of those outlets. So I think it's a great experience and a great practice for us to do beforehand. So, when we do go out there we've really got the experience and we've got the techniques and all of that. (R5)

Many participants commented that doing the news days had improved their confidence both with technical skills and personal skills. Many also commented on how taking part in the news days allowed them to make mistakes in a real, yet safe environment. This was particularly prevalent among those who were now working in journalism.

I think definitely going out into the city and doing news gathering and filming and making all the mistakes that you need to at that point. (R18)

The sense coming from the participants now working in journalism was that the news days created a safe zone, an area where they could experience the real-life pressures of the newsroom but be allowed to make mistakes. This echoes Brandon's theory that experience allowed students to use the mistakes made as learning opportunities (Brandon, 2002).

The news days at both universities also gave the students the opportunity to reflect upon their mistakes in a safe environment, something that they may not have space for when working as a journalist in the "real world". This was appreciated by those now working in industry.

...we obviously had time before we went on air here [refers to place of work] to sort of hone things a little bit more and get used to the workload a bit, but having that platform is vital (R17).

This was also one of Steel et al's themes (2007). They point out that the learning was not only related to the technical aspects of the process but what the students learned about themselves which was more powerful given that the students had been "plunged in at the deep end" (Steel et al 2007, p330).

News days at Coventry University and UWE follow a pattern of gradual build up in that expectations and the broadcast programme length is often increased as the students gain confidence and skills throughout their course. In addition, having to undertake 15 a year means that, although the students are to some extent "plunged in at the deep end" as the unpredictability of news means that often the students don't know what to expect, there is often a gradual build up which Steel et al's post-graduate students weren't able to experience with the one-off election night coverage.

Kolb's experiential learning system (1984) requires students to experience carrying out a skill, reflect upon this, conceptualise and build a theory and then actively experiment, hence repeating their concrete experience. The repetition of news days at UWE and Coventry University meant that students had had the opportunity to reflect, theorise and revise their practice. This meant that the levels of anxiety and stress felt by students in Steel et al's research were not as evident by students in this research as they were gradually immersed into it and after a few weeks became more confident. Repeatedly doing it mitigated the fear factor. Some levels of stress and anxiety were expressed by students at lower levels but it was evident from the research that once students had experienced more news days they grew in confidence.

Lecturer involvement:

In the conclusion to their study Steel et al called for further research into how educators manage the balance between throwing students in at the deep end so they learn through their mistakes while ensuring that the process was positive and productive (Steel et al, 2007,333).

Although lecturers and technical staff at UWE and Coventry are always on hand to help and guide students the overall aim is for the students to run the news days themselves and learn on the job.

The BJTC requires students to be "in charge and running the news day with tutors acting as executive editors and providing feedback in a safe learning environment." (BJTC 2015, p11).

This research showed that opinion was split around year groups about whether lecturers should be more or less involved in the day. Level one students were calling for more staff involvement and more skills workshops before being let loose on news days. This contrasted greatly to the responses from level two and three students who seemed to appreciate a more hands-off approach. This could be attributed to the fact that they had experienced more news days, had greater levels of confidence and were more technically able. Some said that they had learnt more from having to work it out for themselves.

I think one of the nice things about being very autonomous is that you do figure out more stuff on your own than you think you would. Because I think the hands-off approach is nice because I make a lot of mistakes

that are really stupid, and once I've made them once I'm like "Okay, that was really stupid." I'm aware that's really stupid and I'm probably never going to do it again. If a tutor had caught that earlier and told me not to do it, it might not have sunk in in the same way (R16).

The concept of providing more support at an earlier stage and gradually removing it is often referred to as instructional scaffolding. It is used to provide temporary support to promote learning when concepts and skills are first being introduced to students. The theory was first introduced by Jerome Bruner in the 1950s when studying children learning a language and developed in his studies in the 1970s (Wood, Bruner and Ross, 1976).

The results from this research point to the benefits of this kind of incremental autonomy and that that is recognised by the students once they have reached the third year of their studies. However, those in the lower years were less confident and called for more scaffolds to support them. As students developed their skills and gained confidence as they progressed through their degree programme the requirement for the scaffold was less.

Students from both universities also called for feedback from lecturers to be integrated throughout the day rather than at the end of the day, allowing them to reflect and improve on their practice at the same time.

Repetition and reflection:

Repetition and reflection is at the heart of Kolb's experiential learning cycle (Kolb, 1984). The learning cycle operates in the premise that students touch four bases in the process, experiencing, reflecting thinking and acting. Students can engage with the cycle at any point and the starting point for individuals is often different. This model forms the basis of news day pedagogy whereby students learn how to do something, put it into practice through concrete experience, reflect upon this, theorise and then practice it again. This was borne out strongly in the data from this research.

Students all agreed that repetition improves their skills. Even when asked by the researcher whether doing it week in week out or for consecutive days became boring, the students disagreed and said it definitely increased their skills and improved their confidence.

I think the first few weeks was, like personally I did panic. Like, "how am I going to find a story? one a week?" And then when you actually think about all the other journalists who are actually working, they have to find one a day. And then once you get the hang of it, it was really easy, like we were finding three or four ideas a week, and then like, it's up to you to decide "Oh which one do I want to put up on [the course website]?" (R13)

Students at UWE engage with 15 news days each year on a week to week basis. Lecturer feedback is offered formatively throughout the day on a one-to-one basis as problems arise but more formally at the end of the day in a summative session following the TV and radio broadcasts and the publications of the online material. Feedback focuses around the practical issues relating to content but also some of the theoretical concepts that students had been introduced to in other modules on the course.

Often the students are asked to remember how many stories they had pitched in the morning news meeting and how many made the final cut in the programme. They were asked to reflect upon why some stories made air and others didn't and reflect upon news values and the news editor's role as gate-keeper (Manning White, 1950, and Shoemaker, 2009). Students were asked to take notes and to go home and reflect on the feedback in preparation for the following week's news day.

At Coventry University news days are integrated into the curriculum during the earlier parts of the term and culminate in a week for each year group at key stages at the end of the term with feedback offered at the end of each day. Students at both universities are expected to reflect on their practice through a piece of written work.

...those little bits at the end [referring to the critical reflection essays] do, sort of, allow you to bring in what you did know. What you'd learned from other people about the industry, critically evaluate the mistakes you made and how that would affect it in the real industry (R17).

Student responses in the research varied in relation to feedback. One student said he would have preferred intermittent feedback throughout the day rather than at the end so that he would be able to reflect and im-

prove his practice during the day.

I know it's difficult when you've got a deadline breathing down your neck, but feedback throughout, because if I've got an interview in the morning, do the interview in the morning, get it edited by say one o'clock and then I've got another interview at five o'clock and I get feedback on that interview in between, that will tell you where you can go right or wrong and prepare you for the next interview(R2).

Others called for more one-to-one reflection rather than a group session at the end of the day although admitted that this would be very difficult to achieve practically.

Respondents who were now working in the journalism industry spoke positively of the opportunity to reflect at the end of the day, but said that not all students in their cohort had engaged with it. Those who were keen to go into the industry often took their reflection sessions further and engaged in a deeper learning/reflection experience outside of the classroom environment whilst others chose not to engage.

"...the students who are keen, I mean for example a group of us would go to the SU [Student Union] after every news day, but we'd talk about the news day. So it was like an extension of that reflection session" (R18).

This highlights the limitations of this study in that the respondents were self-selecting and hence would be more likely to be those who enjoyed news days and were willing to reflect deeper. It would be interesting to gauge the opinions of those who weren't as enthusiastic about news days and did not wish to pursue a career in journalism or journalism related industries. How did they find the reflection process? was it useful or simply an added thirty minutes at the end of an already long day? Further research into this would be welcomed.

Preparation for Industry:

According to the BJTC website (BJTC, 2015) "Accreditation brings big benefits to employers, trainers and students." But do the 15 news days a year required by the BJTC prepare students for industry and if so how? Respondents were asked whether they felt the news days prepared them for industry. For most (17 of the 20) the responses were based upon their experiences on work placement or their perceptions of the industry from what they had seen and learnt as they were still students at the time of the research. Some students, particularly the level one students were unable to offer opinions on this area as they felt they had not had sufficient experience of the workplace or news days to comment. The three graduate respondents however, were able to reflect upon their current roles as video-journalists in industry.

It became apparent that the students perceived that their news day experiences had not only prepared them for what to expect on work experience but also helped them get the placement in the first place.

...the practical side was really beneficial because it helped me to get a placement ... last summer ... I worked in a TV station. To be honest it was really useful (R1).

I just feel like I know what to do pretty much, the nice thing is that even though I don't consider myself particularly talented on the TV or the broadcast side, I feel like I could go into a broadcast newsroom and know what to do (R16).

For the graduates now working as video-journalists there was glowing praise for the news days in preparing them for their current jobs.

...everything that we've been taught on our news days is pretty much everything that we do every single day. So, like, news days alone are probably one of the most beneficial things for us because it's more practical. And obviously we're out and about doing practical things every day that, to be honest with you, news days have probably been the one thing that's really done it for me, anyway (R19).

These respondents pointed to some differences between news days and working in industry namely working in pairs on news days, for health and safety reasons, whereas in the "real world" they were often expected to work alone. They pointed out that the workload is heavier in industry than it is on news days and discussed how the incremental approach on news days by increasing the workload and the autonomy was useful, but once they had graduated and were working in industry they were "in at the deep end" and there was no gradual build up. They also called for more live reporting in news days as they said this was common-place in their current roles but they had not had a lot of experience of this on their course. Notably the graduates now working in industry and the third year students from both universities called for more news days rather than fewer. They commented on how the more they did the more confident they felt.

Conclusion:

The study was inspired by a notion amongst the researcher and her colleagues at UWE that they thought what they were doing on news days worked in preparing students for a career in the industry, however there was no actual research into how the students were perceiving it or whether it was beneficial to them once they were in the world of work. This study goes some way to filling that knowledge gap.

It has shown that respondents who engaged with this research, albeit self-selecting, perceived many benefits of the experiential learning style embodied in news days.

Firstly, the benefits of “doing it for real” were widespread across the research and students vocalised about how they perceived that the news day experience replicated industry and therefore was an advantage to them in obtaining work placements and also would assist them if and when they were to work in industry.

Secondly the incremental autonomy that comes with the scaffolded learning approach employed in news days developed a deeper level of learning where students came to discover the answers for themselves and learnt from their mistakes. It also allowed educators to manage the difficult balance between throwing students in at the deep end whilst retaining sufficient control to ensure a positive learning experience that Steel et al, 2007 raised.

Thirdly the respondents saw news days as a place to safely make these mistakes that they may not have the luxury of when working in industry and valued the experience of being able to do this in a controlled environment. This was particularly prevalent amongst those who had graduated and were now working as video journalists.

Finally, there was a surprising amount of self-reflection that emerged from the study with students valuing the opportunity to critically reflect often using lessons learned in other parts of the course and from the feedback on news days. They were appreciative of the skills and used this as a place to reflect. Although this study does not attempt to address the apparent rift between journalism educators and scholars that others have referred to (Mensing, 2010, Zelizer, 2004, Greenberg, 2007), it shows the value of integrating theory and practice through the reflection element of Kolb’s learning cycle that Greenberg suggests.

One of its limitations however is that ultimately those who chose to participate tended to be students who were engaged with news days and hence wanted to talk about them. Further studies with students who were less engaged would be valuable to ascertain how they felt the days could be improved. It is hoped that through this small study further research will also be carried out into how the skills learnt on news days can be transferred into other professions as well as journalism allowing students maximum opportunity of securing work in a highly competitive sector. Studies with employers as to the value of news day skills and experiences when employing journalism graduates would also be fruitful.

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