

Future proofing careers for journalism educators outside of research

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Over the past decade, the career development of the journalist-turned educator working at traditional HEIs has principally been framed around their contribution to academic research. Studies have highlighted the expectation placed upon these “hackademics” to mould their activities around institutional research agendas and REF-able outputs.

Whilst the argument for the journalist educator to build a research profile and grow their academic currency is a strong one - as it supports pedagogy and the creation of new knowledge – not enough focus is being placed on advancing the skills-dimension of the role.

Alongside the research agenda, if the journalist educator is also expected to design a curriculum that is forward thinking, ambitious and relevant, it is equally important that practical skills and industry awareness are not left to become too distant or out-dated. Teaching practice needs context and graduates need educators to be fully cognizant of the demands of the industries. The forthcoming Teaching Excellence Framework is predicted to raise the stakes even higher, as academics will be under even more pressure to demonstrate the quality and congruity of what they are offering students.

The journalist educator typically arrives at the academy expected to enrich the curriculum with their wealth of industry experience and contacts. In the rapidly shifting world of journalism, it is an approach that can only sustain itself for a few years, at best. As the gap between the time spent in industry versus the period as an academic grows, questions emerge over the relevancy and authenticity of this on-the-job experience. Some attempt to maintain currency through embarking on short courses or CPD. What is missing from this approach is the ability to apply and test these newly acquired skills in a real world environment. Although the theories on experiential and situated learning generally apply to students in higher education, flipping their application from students to lecturers opens up an interesting debate. Can immersing academics in a busy newsroom or editorial office help develop their teaching practice?

A little over a year ago, I stumbled across an article about a fellowship programme called “Back in the Newsroom” run by the International Centre for Journalists (ICFJ) and funded by the Knight Foundation. It started in 2014, with the aim of “...better aligning what students learn with the rapid pace of change in newsrooms”. The means of achieving this is by sending nominated academics to work in industry over the summer break as professional interns. Speaking of the scheme in 2014, Michael Maness, Vice President of Journalism and Media Innovation, at the Knight Foundation said: “Professors need to be at the forefront of the movement to modernize journalism education. This program allows them to do just that – providing the skills and insights to lead students into the newsrooms of the 21st century.”

The scheme targets those academics who have been out of industry for a number of years. There is also a diversity dimension to the project as it works primarily with traditionally black universities. The list of companies who have participated include: The Washington Post, The Wall Street Journal, USA Today, CNBC, Los Angeles Times, ProPublica, BuzzFeed and WNYC. There is no cost to companies, as travel and accommodation expenses are covered by the project. The academics continue to be paid their university salaries for the duration of the fellowship.

Having seen three cohorts of academics go through the programme,

Elisa Tinsley, Deputy Vice President, Programs, at the ICFJ says:

“...the goal is for them to have developed a relationship with the media outlet to change their syllabus and possibly even their entire curriculum...in year 1 all fellows changed their syllabi post placements.” The

experience seems to have had a significant impact on encouraging academics to shift their teaching from a traditional content-first editorial production to one that prioritises social media and digital content.

This has been the experience of Yolanda McCutchen, Assistant Professor at Howard University who spent a summer as a fellow with The Washington Post. Her fellowship consisted of: Conducting video and analytic research; shadowing video producers at PostTV, homepage producers on universal newsdesk and the social media team; writing copy and headlines; and participating in mobile shooting and word press workshops. When McCutchen returned to her undergraduate course, she replicated the Post's mobile journalism course for her students; increased the use of social media and the analysis of traffic to the student website; and organised student trips to the Post.

Tinsley says other benefits they have observed include a greater collaboration between industry and universities, for example, due to the contacts built up during a fellowship at The Wall Street Journal, the newspaper is now mentoring student journalism projects at Savannah State University. The participating companies cite the project benefits as widening their future talent pool and bringing millennial-ideas into their organisations.

I was curious as to whether a similar approach could work here in the UK as a way of introducing a more experiential aspect to a journalist-educator's career development. I conducted a small anonymous online survey with a group of senior editors and academics. They were asked a series of open and closed questions designed to explore the feasibility of HE academics undergoing industry placements or fellowships. The Journalism academics were from a selection of UK universities. Those surveyed had entered academia from industry and were now teaching on undergraduate courses with a large practical focus. The companies who responded were: Buzzfeed, The Huffington Post, The Independent, the BBC and Bauer Media, The Observer, and Vice Media.

Examples of questions

Academics

Are there any barriers that hinder the development of your continued professional practice? If so, what are they?

Are there any gaps between what you feel students should be taught and your knowledge/skills base? If so, please outline these areas.

How useful is a project that places academics on internships with industry?

In what areas would it be most beneficial to place academics

How long should the internship be?

What difficulties/barriers would a project like this face?

Could you envisage a project like this being facilitated by your institution?

Industry

How well do journalism courses prepare students for the industry?

What would you like to see the j-schools doing more of?

Do you think there could be value in academics doing internships?

How long should they be?

What activities could they get involved in?

What skills and knowledge would you expect the academics to have prior to the internship?

What would the benefits be to your organisation?

What would be the challenges?

How far would you welcome more collaboration between industry and j-schools?

Summary of key responses (Academics):

Those surveyed commonly expressed frustration at institutional staff development processes and a lack of funding for professional development. Some also expressed concerns over busy/ admin heavy workloads

and the impact this was having on their professional practice. As a consequence, finding the time to take part in such an initiative and successfully negotiating a release from their academics were cited as potential barriers to participating in the project.

Some suggested that the scheme would need to take into account the prior experience of the academics, focusing on “updating” rather than learning new skills. The suggestion was also made that it needed to concentrate on those who had been out of the industry the longest, as they were most in need.

In terms of the duration of the fellowship, six weeks was the most popular suggestion. One respondent suggested having an industry placement for a whole year and that academics should be required to go on placements on a five/six year cycle to ensure that curriculum was up to date.

The use of the words “placement and internship” were challenged as it suggested the experience would be below the academic’s professional standing.

Summary of key responses (Industry):

They were keen to develop relationships with reputable institutions and create a pipeline of talent by having access to strong graduates, and having the ability to feed into the curriculum.

A number of those surveyed expressed a concern that students were still being prepared for print industries and the inclusion of recent advances in digital content within the curriculum was limited.

There was the view that courses needed to respond to the fact that “...publishers are now looking for all-rounders who can source photos, design and promote their own work. Being able to write/report is no longer enough.”

Companies were keen to offer experiences around the metrics associated with journalism and audience development. Other activities for placements suggested: Content planning, analytics tools, distribution techniques (social and SEO).

One respondent suggested the relationship could be reciprocated, for example, academics could offer their expertise in the area of subediting or commissioning and help to develop young writers on the publications to develop writing tone and understand legal considerations.

So what now? Overall, there was a sufficient level of interest expressed by those who responded to the survey, and from others whom I have spoken with informally to warrant running a small pilot project in the summer of 2017. The precise details are still being formulated, but the pilot is likely to incorporate some of the following features:

- It would be based on a six-week fellowship model.
- There would be an open call for academics to apply. This would be restricted to those who had been out of the industry for more than five years. Participants would be selected based on a set criterion in order to identify those that are most likely to benefit from the scheme. An academic’s participation would need to be endorsed by their University.
- An academic’s prior experience and development needs would be aligned with the participating companies. Crucially, it would avoid prescribing a set template of activities for the academic to undertake. It would need to be tailored around the specific development areas for the individual academic.
- Academics would be supplied with company peer mentor who were working within senior roles.
- The academic and company would co-design and agree a work plan (with specific outcomes and measures of development).
- Academics would complete a weekly log of activities.

Once the outcome of this pilot has been evaluated, the ambition would be to seek funding to roll out the project and involve more participants in 2018/19. During the course of the 2017 pilot, discussions would also take place with universities to explore whether there a mechanism could be developed to integrate the fellowships into staff development or sabbatical schemes.

Further details on the pilot will be published via www.ajeuk.org.