

# Providing students with real experience while maintaining a safe place to make mistakes

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## Abstract:

A news day is a hybrid of simulation and experiential learning where students become practising journalists in a learning environment in order to learn the trade. The days are undertaken on 58 journalism courses in the UK accredited by the Broadcast Journalism Training Council (BJTC). Initial research by the author has found that news days - “doing it for real” - had huge benefits for students. They were able to experience the pressures of being a working journalist whilst being allowed to make mistakes in a safe environment. This research examines this juxtaposition of “doing it for real” in the public domain versus the pedagogical safety net of being in a classroom environment by comparing news day practice at two BJTC accredited journalism courses at Nottingham Trent University and the University of the West of Eng-

land. It concludes that placing news day material in the public domain increases motivation and accountability among students while posing a number of pedagogical challenges for staff, changing their role from lecturer to facilitator. Furthermore, if the material goes into the public domain, their role changes to that of a news editor.

**Key Words:** journalism education, pedagogy, training.

## Introduction:

**In an era dominated by social media and where everything that people do seems to be captured by camera and posted online, it may seem odd to even consider whether student work produced on news days should be published online, particularly when most students seem to share their lives on the internet.**

However, the pros and cons of putting student work into the public domain needs to be thoroughly explored since there are implications for students, lecturers and the teaching of journalism.

A news day is a hybrid of simulation and experiential learning where students become practising journalists. The Broadcast Journalism Training Council (BJTC) the industry accreditation body, requires all accredited courses to include 15 'news days' a year at each level.

Universities in the UK differ in their approaches to putting their students' news day work in the public domain. By comparing two very different approaches at two BJTC accredited journalism courses in the UK, the University of the West of England (UWE) and Nottingham Trent University (NTU), and interviewing lecturers teaching on these courses, this paper examines the advantages and disadvantages of putting this material in the public domain and the changing implications for the role of the lecturer.

It builds upon initial research by the author (Evans, 2016), which found that news days have huge benefits for the students. For example, they are able to experience the pressures of being a working journalist, whilst being allowed to make mistakes in a safe environment.

## Literature Review

Experiential learning is widely used in journalism education in higher education through news days and work placements. This evolving form of news media pedagogy is being undertaken on 58 fully-accredited BJTC courses in the UK at 38 institutions and has implications on the changing priorities for vocational courses and the role of the lecturer. While the model is backed by industry and required by the accreditation body, academics have asked how valuable it is in the changing world of journalism (Mensing, 2010 and 2011).

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.

Learning through experience though is nothing new. For years nursing staff have used this model in training alongside simulation (McCallum, 2006). In addition, workplace learning (Teunissen, 2015) has been advocated widely in other disciplines such as economics (Hawtrey, 2007).

Much has been written about the benefits of experiential learning and simulation in nursing, management

and, to a lesser degree journalism (Charles and Luce 2016, Evans 2016, Kartveit, 2009, Steel et al, 2007). Charles and Luce argue that different people get different things out of experiential learning and it depends on prior skills. However, one of the key findings in all of the work was that students needed to feel safe while experiencing this kind of learning.

Pollock and Biles (2016) explored the lived experience of learning in immersive simulation in nursing education and offered an insight into what it means to undergraduate student nurses. They concluded that:

“Immersive simulation has been described as an experience where students are willing to take risks to test the limits of their capabilities and practice readiness. Faculty who want to use simulation as a teaching and learning methodology can strive to create safe and supportive learning environments where students are willing and able to engage and take those risks.” (Pollock and Bile, 2016, p.318)

They called for further study into this area.

Meanwhile, in management education Kisfalvi and Oliver drew upon the work of psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott (1965) in arguing that in order for experiential learning to be beneficial a “safe space” needed to be created early if deeper learning is to be achieved and this would enable critical thinking (Kisfalvi and Oliver 2016, p.735).

Winnicott (1989) says the classroom becomes a transitional or in-between space that prepares students to move into the real world. Kisfalvi and Oliver also look at the changing role of the teacher in this process and refer to Ramsey and Fitzgibbons (2005) who claim that the learning approach needs to be more holistic and should be about “being in the classroom and forging a learning community” as opposed to “doing something to students” (2005, p.35). This issue of the changing role of the teacher will be taken up later in this article.

Brandon (2002) suggested that students undertaking experiential learning used mistakes as learning opportunities therefore they need a safe place in order to do this.

This concept of a safe place to make mistakes was borne out in the author’s earlier research findings (Evans 2016). Former students now working as journalists said they appreciated having the time and the space to get things wrong and learn from their mistakes.

*“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, 2015)*

*“...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 work-load a bit, but having that platform is vital.” (R17, 2015)*

However some academics have questioned the notion of a safe space. Gayle et al (2010) discussed the tensions involved with balancing “safe spaces” and critical thinking capacity and examined what they called “moments of difficulty” when comfort and evaluation collide. Meanwhile Stengel and Weems (2010) looked at what constitutes a safe space and whether the comfort of the classroom was sufficient for the level of challenge needed in education today. They concluded that a safe space in education is not impossible or undesirable, but that it is always contested and ambiguous.

## Methods

This research uses semi-structured interviews with journalism lecturers in 2016 at the UWE and NTU, both BJTC accredited journalism courses. It uses the two institutions as case studies comparing practices on news days, approaches in relation to publishing/broadcasting news day material and identifies themes emerging from both places.

Five journalism lecturers participated in this part of the study. Two were from NTU and three from the UWE. The two universities have very different approaches to placing material in the public domain. The purpose was to look at the different approaches and examine how this affected the pedagogy and the role of the lecturer. The interviews were audio recorded. They were then transcribed and coded into themes for analysis.

The researcher used grounded theory for analysis involving the construction of theory through the analysis of data (Glaser and Strauss, 1967, cited in Croucher and Cronn Mills, 2015) using a combination of both approaches.

This research also draws upon the semi-structured group interviews with students of Journalism at UWE and Coventry University and former students of journalism from UWE now working in industry, who took part in the author’s previous study conducted in 2015.

Twenty participants took part in the initial study in 2015. Four focus groups were held in Coventry with under-graduate students, ten first years, four second years and one third year. One semi-structured group interview was conducted at the UWE with two third year students. The three former UWE students were all working as video journalists and had graduated the previous year (2014).

Participants were invited to take part via emails to all students in their year groups. It should be noted that their participation was self-selecting so has a subjective effect on the results as it tended to be those who enjoyed news days that chose to take part.

## Findings and Discussion

### The different approaches to news days

The two universities use very different approaches to placing news day material in the public domain.

The University of the West of England employs a very cautious and gradual approach to autonomy and exposure, focussing on the process of production rather than the final product.

News days are integrated into the modular teaching structure at undergraduate and post-graduate level. Students undergo a series of workshops to learn the basic skills and then put those skills into practice during a series of weekly news days.

During the first year students learn basic TV and radio newsgathering skills. At second year the broadcast skills are increased considerably and mobile reporting and editing is introduced. 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. However, the TV and radio material is kept in house and the deadlines, although adhered to strictly, are purely for teaching students to work within time restraints and to create a sense of urgency in the newsroom. In the third year, news days focus on tri-media: radio, TV and online. The online content is produced for a password protected website with the material moderated by the lecturer on the day. The pedagogical premise behind this approach is that the focus is primarily on the process rather than the final product. However, during the course of the module the lecturer may take the decision that the students are at a standard which he/she considers safe to publish into the public domain and are able to remove the safety net of the password. The decision is made by the lecturers themselves, if and when they feel the material is safe to place in the public domain. This stringent and cautious approach means, however, that some student work may not make it onto the website at this stage as the story may have errors, thus depriving them of the public exposure. This tri-media model with a gradual autonomy and exposure to the public domain is also used on the Masters level news day modules at the UWE.

At Nottingham Trent University news days are again integrated into the modular teaching structure but staff have a different approach to those at UWE when it comes to placing material in the public domain.

At undergraduate level they produce material for TV and radio bulletins whilst simultaneously populating an outward-facing website. The focus of the news day is digital first so students are encouraged to produce content for the web from the outset and update it as the day and the story progresses. The material is only published once the lecturer feels it has been sufficiently moderated and is safe to do so.

The university has also recently started to upload TV and radio programmes to YouTube once they have been checked by the lecturer and any technical errors ironed out.

A similar approach is employed at Masters level where the students' TV news day material is uploaded to a Vimeo channel and online work is uploaded to a public facing website. The lecturer makes the decision whether to publish in both cases after they have made checks for legal issues and, to a smaller degree, production issues. On one occasion this year (2016), Masters students also took part in a live radio show on one of their news days that was live streamed via Facebook. Due to the nature of it being live, it was not able to be moderated.

This approach was adopted to increase student motivation and create a sense of doing it for real as opposed to within a safety net.

Although very different approaches were employed by the two universities, there were a lot of similarities in the issues raised by lecturers about placing material in the public domain.

A range of themes emerged of which four were identified as recurring. These will be discussed below.

Public domain exposure increases motivation. All of the respondents commented that when they placed news day material in the public domain it increased the motivation of the students. One used the term “galvanising” to describe the affect putting the material in the public domain had had on her students. All said that the sense of “doing it for real” (Steel 2007 and Evans 2016), increased and it gave them a real sense of purpose and urgency. Almost all of the respondents also said it raised the students’ game when they knew their work was going into the public domain.

This is particularly evident in the quote below from a lecturer at UWE.

*“...it adds an extra tier of excitement for the students, I think, knowing that people will see their stories... from a professional point of view it adds to the potential employers, if you read this site you will see my work and you will see that I can do things so it demands that extra level of complete accuracy from them because it is going in the public domain. If they make a mistake, everyone will see their mistake. It adds a pressure and in real life daily news is about pressure and dealing with pressure so I think that if you can do it there are some real advantages to it; it’s just you have to balance those advantages against the risks.” (R6, 2016)*

The quote also picks up a common theme amongst all the participants of the student desire to share their work. Students like to be able to show their friends, whether it be through social media and tweeting pictures of what they are doing or being able to send a link to their mum of themselves on the TV. They are able to actively participate in the day on a public platform and show off what they have done. The following quote from a lecturer at the UWE attributes this to growing use of social media and the apparent need among some students to document their lives on it.

*“...it makes them feel like they’re professionals, it gives them a big sense of confidence and, it sounds a bit sad, but they can show their mum, their auntie; they really like showing their family. What I’ve found with radio is that even when they’re doing the bulletins that are broadcast in the newsroom they are taking pictures and tweeting themselves doing ‘look at me I’m in the radio studio’ because they want to share, they are really into sharing the new internet generation are really, really into sharing so the advantage is it’s really easy for them to do that.” (R5, 2016)*

On one occasion at Nottingham Trent University where lecturers decided to live stream the radio programme on Facebook they experienced an increased level of engagement from students.

*“...the level of engagement of those students went through the roof. They were much more engaged, they were much more willing to go that extra mile, they were more creative.” (R3, 2016)*

Participants were also asked how putting material in the public domain or not had affected students’ ability to get more from their contributors or whether contributors were more willing to contribute. Data from both universities showed mixed results. In some cases students found that people were less willing to participate if the material wasn’t going to be published/broadcast as it was only seen as a training exercise and less real.

However, in other cases the opposite was true. Respondents commented that with sensitive stories contributors were more willing to participate if the material wasn’t going into the public domain.

## Confidence and accountability

If and when lecturers do choose to publish, upload or even live stream material into the public domain there is a notable difference in student confidence and also their accountability for their work.

One lecturer noted that students were conscious to ensure they were doing things right as the quote below reflects.

*“One of the students articulated to me the sense of accountability she felt by producing a story knowing that the public will hold her to account is she doesn’t get the story right.” (R4, 2016)*

Although they may well be galvanised and motivated by the product ending up in the public domain, for many this was an added pressure. Earlier research by the author found that once students were working as journalists after graduating they appreciated the safe space to make mistakes that they didn’t have in industry. This can also be seen to bear out Winnicott’s transitional space concept (Winnicott, 1989), whereby the classroom is a transitional or in-between space that prepares students to move into the real world. Having a safe place to make mistakes allows the student to be more creative and take risks, without the fear of complaints or legal action. It also enables the teacher to create an environment where deeper learning can be achieved through reflecting upon the mistakes of others (Winnicott, 1965). This was borne out strongly by comments from lecturers at the UWE:

*"If they are terrified of making a mistake because it's going into the public domain, they always take the safe course. They won't develop as journalists. Sometimes you can see that they are going to make a mistake or something and let them make the mistake so afterwards you can sit down with them all and say, 'OK, let's analyse this story. What was good and what was bad about that, what was wrong with it?' And they can then see what went wrong and what the danger was and use it as a teaching aid, but if it was actually going out on air you would have had to stop that. [But in that scenario, just] one student would learn from you shouting at them 'don't do that, that's wrong' but the others wouldn't. Being able to make a mistake in a safe environment that you can discuss [with all the students] is a great advantage." (R6, 2016)*

## Checks and changes

Another point raised by all the respondents in this study was the level of checks and changes needed to news day material if it was to be placed in the public domain. At both universities students are supported by academic and technical staff during their news days. The students gradually experience more autonomy as they progress through the course at different levels, following an instructional scaffolding approach, a concept introduced by Bruner in the 1950s and based upon Vygotsky's concept of an expert assisting a novice, or an apprentice. (Wood, Bruner, Ross, 1976; Vygotsky, 1987)

But this research showed that that concept of scaffolding takes on a different dimension if the institution chooses to publish or broadcast news day material. Rather than stepping back and allowing the students more autonomy, the lecturers at both universities found themselves becoming more involved and taking steps to correct material before it went out into the public domain, as the following quote from a lecturer at NTU illustrates.

*"I keep a running track of the changes and I document them in my marking, for the benefit of an external, also for the benefit of the student. I will point out 'This is the mark that your piece gets. I have had to change spelling errors in order to publish it. I've changed your headline from what you wrote to what I have written.' I don't restructure and I don't re-write. I change spelling mistakes. I change grammatical errors. I make it clean and I document all of that." (R2, 2016)*

Lecturers at both universities were very keen to ensure that material was legally safe before broadcast and said that on occasions material was not published if the lecturing staff could not be certain that it was safe.

Alongside the fear of being sued if legally unsound material were to be published or broadcast, there was a strong sense of protecting the university's reputation and the public perception of the institution. Lecturers were keen to ensure that some general standards were met if the material was to become public facing. One lecturer at UWE suggested that if student news day work was to be published or broadcast in the public domain then it should be clearly labelled to help prevent any misconceptions.

*"I think if it was broadcast as a news outlet then I think that the viewers or the listeners might enjoy some of the creativity but I think they may be slightly confused as already there are conventions out there about how news is delivered and if you are not making it to that standard then people aren't going to listen, aren't going to watch, aren't going to look at the website and that kind of thing. If it is labelled clearly that it is student work then I think that helps." (R5, 2016)*

Labelling student work as such when placing it in the public domain was discussed following the presentation of this research at the Association of Journalism Education conference in June 2016. Some delegates argued that this process has been used in the performing arts for years, whereby student performances are recorded and uploaded online but clearly labelled so viewers understand the level the students are at. However, one delegate pointed out that at his university he had received a call from the Vice Chancellor's office asking him to take down student journalism work from the internet as there were technical errors in it and there were fears that it would reflect badly on the university and the course.

This raises questions as to how far staff should become involved in student work. Should staff clean up student work if it is to be published/broadcast? If they do can it still be called student work? How do teaching staff assess this work if the lecturer has changed it to make it safe for publication? The NTU lecturer kept a record of all the changes but on a busy news day this is time-consuming and changes the lecturer's role somewhat from teacher to news editor.



## The lecturer's role

Experiential learning takes the traditional lecturer role away from the 'chalk and talk' style teaching and to a more informal method that puts the learner at the centre of the experience and requires the teacher to become more of a facilitator. The news day method of teaching is based firmly on this pedagogy, whereby students are required to act and do things for themselves, assisted by the teacher. After the student has experimented with the "doing" stage, then the teacher provides feedback that the student can use for reflection and to develop theories and practice, echoing Kolb's experiential learning cycle (Kolb, 1984).

The BJTC guidelines for news days state that students must run the day themselves and teachers should act in a supervisory role as executive editors, to provide feedback in a safe learning environment (BJTC, 2015).

Once the decision is made though to place the material in the public domain, the role then changes again to resemble that of a news editor. This point was raised by lecturers at both universities

One of the lecturers at UWE was particularly concerned that if material was placed in the public domain she would face an issue balancing her education role and achieving the learning outcomes alongside the need to be a news editor.

*"One of the important decisions that we make before we publish anything is the question, 'Can it be sufficiently moderated?' If it cannot be sufficiently moderated by the tutor – and this doesn't mean replacing their education goals with a news editor's goals. You've got to balance, 'How can I still maintain my educational outcomes and the learning experience, alongside being a news editor as well, who is having to sufficiently moderate everything?'" (R4, 2016)*

Highlighted area does not make grammatical sense: can it be slightly rewritten?

The same observations were raised by staff at NTU, who, although keen to give their students exposure in the public domain, realised it changed their jobs.

*"We just have to be on our guard a little more and we have to be editors as well as teachers. At the end of the day, we're the ones ultimately that press the 'publish' button and also give the engineers the nod as to whether or not to post it on YouTube. So everything gets an eye cast over it before it goes." (R2, 2016)*

This raises pedagogical questions into how much learning is being done? Some of the participants were concerned that if the lecturer becomes the news editor then the student was not taking responsibility for their mistakes or their learning. Questions were asked by respondents as to whether by re-writing or tweaking the edit, the lecturer was becoming the author as well as the publisher and the material that ends up in the public domain becomes a hybrid of staff and student work.

## Conclusion

This research has shown that there is a conflict between the benefits of placing student material in the public domain and giving them the exposure that leads to confidence and a sense of reality and the pedagogical safety net of the classroom.

While exposure in the public domain brings increased engagement and motivation and adds to the sense of "doing it for real" (Steel et al, 2007; Evans, 2016), it also brings with it some serious pedagogical challenges.

If the product of a student learning exercise is placed into the public domain then the lines between simulation and real world become blurred. News days are a hybrid of experiential and simulation based learning and, according to the industry accreditation body's guidelines, tutors on these days should act as "executive editors providing feedback in a safe learning environment." (BJTC 2015).

Kisfalvi and Oliver (2015) argued that in order for deeper learning to be achieved and for experiential learning to be beneficial, a safe space needed to be created early in the pedagogical process and this would enable critical thinking.

This concept has been born out in the data from this research both from lecturers and former journalism students now working in industry.

However, with multi-media newsrooms/classrooms in universities claiming to echo industry's "digital first" mantra and the increasing normalisation of people's lives being recorded on social media, then it poses the question of how do we protect that safe space?

With the exception of one live-streamed radio news day at NTU, staff at both universities conducted vigorous checks before material was published or was uploaded into the public domain, ensuring legal and technical errors were eliminated. However, this raises questions about how to assess this material fairly and the authorship of the material itself. One solution offered by staff at the UWE was to assess students on the process of their news days rather than the end product. Staff pointed out that the day was structured around the process of learning and not whether the final piece made it to air. NTU employed a similar yet slightly different approach in that students were assessed on the version of the work they had made and then the lecturer made changes to tidy up the piece for publication, with the student by their side learning from the mistakes.

It would seem that publishing/broadcasting news day material to the outside world inevitably means less autonomy for the student and more staff intervention.

This model of news day workflow subtly changes the teacher's role from lecturer to facilitator and, if the piece needs to be published, news editor. Moreover, staff become news editors with a room full of trainees on their first day. It also raises questions as to how equipped we are as teachers and universities to carry the responsibility of publishing/broadcasting to the outside world and whether it is fair on the students. After all, these are students, they are learning and they make mistakes

It is hoped that through this small study further research will also be carried out into how best to balance the need for exposure in the public domain and the pedagogical safety net of the classroom. Further research into the extent of this with more BJTC accredited courses would be welcome to give a fuller picture.

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