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Back pocket learning

— enabling ‘digital natives’ to use smart devices to ensure understanding of the threshold concepts of journalism

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Introduction

Journalism is changing – the way we gather news and the way we publish it. According to Westmoreland this change is because of the introduction of the touch screen. As a result publishing is easier and broadcasting is no longer the privilege of only the wealthy. (Westmoreland, 2013) However, this paradigm shift in the profession needs to be mirrored in education, addressed in how we teach journalism, since it is often still taught in a traditional way.

This leads to problems in understanding, partially because in broadcast-heavy courses the emphasis is on learning the equipment needed to produce radio and television content rather than on the process and skill of news reporting. The time spent focusing on navigating the kit reduces the time spent learning the key concepts behind journalism. As a consequence it can sometimes become difficult for learners to understand completely what is essential to the story. They can produce technically competent radio or television packages without fully understanding what news is.

According to Nickerson ‘Understanding is an active process. It requires the connecting of facts, the relating of newly acquired information to what is already known, the weaving of bits of knowledge into an integral and cohesive whole’ (cited in Entwistle, 2009, p. 45). Because the threshold concepts become buried in the midst of skills learning there is an obfuscation of the theory necessary to understand how journalism works. Real learning in this case involves ‘not only having knowledge but also

doing something with it' (*ibid*). If the output produced sounds good but do not tell the audience the story then we have not produced anything worthwhile.

These threshold concepts which are, according to the Reuters Handbook of Journalism (2014), understanding the audience and telling the story. However, these have, in the past few years at Coventry University, been somewhat overlooked in our focus on product rather than comprehension of the fundamentals of news. Because of this it appears that some students have only a basic knowledge of journalism and the fear is that some 'even got through a degree programme ...at this level' by mimicry rather than understanding (Cousin, 2006). Teaching these concepts without at the same time requiring learning complicated new kit would enable the first years to focus on understanding the journalism threshold concepts; of ethics, storytelling, news values and audience.

Rationale

With this in mind, we tested the 'Back Pocket' theory for the students in the first year intake 2012-2013 using induction to teach the core skill - how to tell a story. Back pocket journalism, a term coined by one of the researchers, draws on the concept of mobile journalism (MoJo), which emphasises the use of the now almost ubiquitous mobile technologies, specifically the smart phone, to report and produce journalistic artefacts (Mills, Egglestone, Rashid and Väättäjä, 2012). The thinking behind this is that most of our first year intake students grew up with digital technologies and could be considered 'Digital Natives'. A digital native by definition is someone who has grown up with the current technology and so has ability to use it well. (Prensky, 2001). The pilot project also took cognisance of the potential of m-learning to "have transformed pedagogy and facilitated student engagement in a variety of course contexts" (Cochrane and Bateman 2009). The support for this was an andragogical approach to facilitate learners to be 'as self-directed as possible, allowing them to be creative with assignments and projects' (Blondy, 2007), while still cementing core concepts related to the practice of journalism.

Andragogy as proposed by Knowles (1980) is an educational theory focused on adult learners with a specific emphasis on the "learner's ability, need, and desire to take responsibility for learning" (Hiemstra & Sisco, 1990). Within the higher education context, the adoption of andragogy as a

teaching and learning method is mixed. Yoshimoto, Inenaga and Yamada (2007) noted that the use of andragogy at higher levels of education was more developed in Germany than in the United Kingdom or Japan. The choice to move towards an andragogical approach was motivated by the need to address issues of conceptual understanding of journalistic issues and production in an engaging and student-centred manner. Incorporating technological tools that the students use on a daily basis further relocated the required learning to a student centre rather than a classroom focus, allowing students to take responsibility for their own learning.

As this was a pilot project, it was important to gauge student readiness for the implementation of such an approach. A 2011 study by the University of Sheffield (2011) found that 99.6% of students at the university had mobile phones, with 56% owning a smartphone. While the experience of the researchers had pointed to the common use of mobile phones and tablet computers by students, it was necessary to test this assumption through some informal research. During the 'raise your hands' survey at the beginning of the academic year 2012/2013 all 37 students had a smartphone or a tablet at induction.

Once it was established that the students had access to the required devices, they were sent out to gather stories using their phones and tablets to create the 'Freshers Guide' published on iCov.co.uk, the journalism course outward facing website. The students were allowed to choose the format of their story - audio, video, slide show, or text - it didn't matter as long as the story was clear. The aim was to direct the students attention to the main or threshold journalism concepts while creating content using what they already have in their back pocket.

They were instructed to think about their audience - someone like themselves - and find what would be appropriate to tell other first year students about the surrounding area. The students were then told that they needed to create these articles/packages/films using what was in their 'back pocket', collaborating with each other using their phones and apps.

The apps that they used were the ones most familiar to them. This had the double benefit of helping them to grasp the story without the fear of the unknown technology, and the teaching team learned new ways to gather the news when the students shared their app knowledge. This was in keeping with Knowles' idea that "curricular perspectives change from

postponed to immediacy of application and from subject-centeredness to performance-centeredness (1980).

Freeing them from the 'kit' consequence enabled them to change the way they viewed what they were creating and why, and focus on the narrative. As a good journalist can tell you, storytelling is primarily about developing a 'nose for news', a shift in the way one thinks – developing the news mind. Rather than passively gathering information, a news mind looks at each thing and says 'Who? What? When? Where? Why? How? Why not?' 'Why should I tell anyone about this?' 'Does this matter?' 'Who is the audience that I produce for?' 'Would they care?' 'Should they care?'

These are the threshold concepts of journalism, what is news and who is the audience– the rest falls into place after that.

As a result of this task, the stories produced were technologically as good as what could have been produced with the University equipment available and in some cases, were a better fit for news because of the immediacy and flexibility. As these students were also the first students at Coventry University to be given a Macbook Pro with editing software, they also were the first cohort to be able to edit and manage their products without relying on established computer labs. In all, they became information gathering, mobile publishing and broadcasting pods – each of them.

This had several implications:

First – those who were 'truly' comfortable with using the technology Digital Natives were able to jump in and develop news gathering quickly, they were able to 'get' the theory behind the news and understand news values and audience theory. Unfortunately the concept of the Digital Native did not apply to all of the students, even though all had a smart device. Although some were in fact, masters of digital living, others were only just able to use a few apps and obvious technology. It was discovered that the theory that *all* young people were Digital Natives was flawed. (Bennett, Maton & Kervin, 2008) A small percentage had access to the technology but not the interest or ability to use it well. The initial group work disguised this as the others carried the 'digital sub-natives'. This small percentage had the very issue we attempted to avoid by using the mobile devices – the difficulty of learning how to use the technology while trying to tell the story. However, the majority were in fact Digital Natives and responded strongly to this approach and flourished.

This experience of differing levels of digital competence made it clear that digital literacy still is an important component of learning, even at higher education level and even among those thought to be Digital Natives. From a teaching perspective it points to the need to draw on Beetham and Sharpe's digital literacy framework (2010), which describes "how students seem to develop higher order digital capabilities on a foundation of access and functional skills." The opportunity, then, lies in assessing initial skill levels at induction and finding ways to scaffold learning, building on those foundational skills in order to aid students in reaching higher levels of digital literacy and truly embracing their supposed position as Digital Natives.

This differentiation between students within the broader Digital Native group was confirmed the following year with the 2013/14 intake. Serendipitously that cohort were not taught Back Pocket learning in the first term and instead had the equipment focused heavy teaching method of previous years. By the second term it became apparent that the students were sadly lacking in the ability to tell stories although they had followed the previous year's scheme of work - without the back pocket session during induction.

Feedback from on the previous year's team found that some students gave the appearance of initially understanding, but had no real grounding in narrative.

One of the course lecturers, Natalie Chisholm, noted that "Getting them out finding the story and talking to people was crucial in the beginning. This gave them confidence and helped them to understand the importance of the story. That was missing from the second set (year B) - they didn't gain the confidence needed to gather the stories. I feel this demonstrated Back Pocket Journalism as a valuable practice."

Her experience was echoed in that of Teaching Assistant, Simon Pipe, who said, "There was a marked difference in student satisfaction. The second group (Group B) did not feel they had been taught. They weren't able to grasp the threshold concepts because the Back Pocket method was missing in the first three weeks - everything was dominated by the kit. I've seen this professionally as well - when learning new kit, the journalism suffered because of the practical demand of the manual control. They just weren't thinking about the journalism - what the story was."

Year B had the Back Pocket Journalism and Learning session at the beginning of the second term with remedial storytelling workshops. They then had weekly 'newsdays' workshops with one-on-one feedback. Even with this support some students did not grasp fully the threshold concepts and there were a larger number of fails at the end of the year, which seems to point to the need to "frontload" the experience at the beginning of the student journey in order to ensure understanding from the outset.

A comparison of the teaching methods of the two intakes, Year A 2012/13 and Year B 2013/14, revealed telling differences in approach and outcome: Year A were taught using an andragogical approach with the Back Pocket learning beginning with induction week, while year B used a pedagogical model based on the traditional teaching method of lectures and workshops with separate later skills teaching sessions with no Back Pocket journalism/learning in induction week. At the end of the first term Year A were more confident in the area of radio and were able to produce two hour shows in groups on alternate days for two weeks. This was due to their ability to gather news more easily. They spent more time in the narrative and less time grappling with the equipment. Year B struggled with radio and had difficulty producing a half hour of content over four days. In some cases year B students gave up entirely in the news week until we readdressed this in the second term.

Future development

The case study highlighted the differences in technological proficiency between students within the same cohort and emphasised the importance of digital literacy training to ensure that all students develop to the required level of digital competence. In order to address this issue, next year there will be an online hub for student support, using peer learning as well as lecturer support, rather than just the outward-facing hub for content. The proficient 'Digital Natives' will produce 'how to' videos for this hub introducing key apps for the various mobile platforms. This will ensure students can access help on demand. This hub will have a forum for questions on digital editing and examples of Back Pocket Journalism created by the lecturers and facilitators easily accessible on the mobile devices. This content will be allowed to evolve rather than be tightly scripted, and will foster a sharing of experiences and help support the self-directed nature of andragogy (Blondy, 2007).

Conclusion

This pilot project experience and the comparison with traditional teaching approaches seems to demonstrate how Back Pocket Journalism as a teaching and learning approach allows key concepts of storytelling and journalism basics to be taught using technology that is familiar. This freed students to be creative and solidified their understanding and deep learning on their own terms, without the complications of learning new equipment, for the most part. However, it is necessary to ensure that all the students are competent users of their own back pocket technology and demonstrate the required level of comfort and familiarity with the tools used. Adopting a digital literacy approach paired with peer learning and mentoring may address these issues.

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