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Spicol Daily: A Pacific Media Partnership Case Study

For three years, the University of the South Pacific has hosted a unique week-long annual conference of young Pacific Island leaders where they “live out” daily examples of good governance and accountability. SPICOL, or the Student Pacific Islands Conference of Leaders, is a university interdisciplinary simulation exercise. Students take on the role of prime ministers, cabinet ministers, lobbyists, researchers — and reporters for the news media. Journalism students report, edit, publish and broadcast for their campus station Radio Pasifik and the special conference training newspaper, Spicol Daily. In 1999, Spicol Daily became a tabloid “newspaper within newspaper” publishing in one of Fiji’s three national newspapers, the Daily Post. The challenge provided a dramatic and practical learning curve for students.

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Since 1997, the University of the South Pacific has hosted an annual conference of young Pacific Island leaders where they “live out” daily examples of good governance and accountability. SPICOL, or the Student Pacific Islands Conference of Leaders, is a university interdisciplinary simulation exercise. It is modelled on the original Pacific Islands Conference of Leaders that has its Secretariat in the Pacific Islands Development Program (PIDP) at the East-West Center in Honolulu, Hawai’i. Tri-annual meetings are held with heads of governments of the Pacific Island nations attending the meetings. Papers are prepared by academics and others and are then presented at the meetings. Participants reach regional policy agreements, usually by consensus.

SPICOL aims to present students with a simulation environment where they have to apply many aspects of their learning at USP in a holistic manner. Students take on the roles of heads of state, academic and scientific consultants, pressure groups — such as environmental, feminist and religious groups — just as in the real PICOL. The simulation usually lasts more than a week, with an intensive retreat built into the simulation

exercise. Each simulation has a topic or theme that is hoped to lead to a “conflict” between national and regional interests. Hopefully, creative policy solutions will be found.

Topics in past years were:

1997: “Tourism in the 21st Century”.

1998: “The impact of the World Trade Organisation on the South Pacific in the 21st Century”.

1999: “Population and development: Issues in population growth, migration and reproductive health”.

The theme planned for the 2000 SPICOL is “*Security Issues Facing the Region in the 21st Century*”. The concept behind the simulation is based on the harsh realities of the region. Many graduates of USP, a university owned by twelve member countries,¹ eventually end up working in a government capacity.

However, nothing in their formal education prepares them for roles of good governance — good decision making and good leadership. While SPICOL does not necessarily give students those skills, it at least introduces the students to some of the skills and dynamics involved in their eventual roles. These include:

- Negotiation
- Goal setting
- Compromise
- Diplomacy
- Etiquette
- Public speaking and presentation
- Delegation skills
- Communication skills

An important part of the simulation and the balance of power is the role of the news media — and coverage of the conference has been provided by journalism students from USP working voluntarily on *Spicol Daily* and *Radio Pasifik*. *Spicol Daily* began life as a modest A4 newsletter with a mere print run of 200 photocopies. But during 1999, publication of *Spicol Daily* was fully integrated into a second-year Print and Online Journalism course, relaunched as a daily tabloid newspaper in partnership with Fiji’s *Daily Post* with an online edition, and gained a high public profile for the conference. The online development was another example of innovative media moves on the Internet in the Pacific. (Hulsen, 1999; Robie, 1999a, 1999b) The publication won the Best Occasional Publication category in the Journalism Education Association’s 1999 Ossie Awards.

The six-year-old USP journalism program lacked a seriously practical dimension in its early years while it was being funded by the French Government as an aid project. Now that the

SPICOL Methodology

university has taken over full funding and staffing responsibility for the program, its publications and radio station have become characterised by an integrated learning and problem-based learning pedagogy reminiscent of the University of Papua New Guinea journalism school in the mid-1990s. (Hooper, 1997; Robie, 1995, 1997) The “liberal-professional” philosophy underpinning the program includes core courses which support a balance between the theoretical and the practical.

This article outlines the context and the methodology of the newspaper and the student journalists working on it.

SPICOL participants are made up of four distinct groups of students. Firstly, the interested parties such as Government ministers and officials, non-government organisations and pressure groups. Second, there are presenters of information — social, physical and biological scientists, and lobby groups. Third, news reporters cover the conference and related events. Finally, there is the conference steering committee — a group of students who organise and run SPICOL.

A handful of academic staff from the history/politics, psychology and journalism departments are involved, but only in an advisory role. Essentially, the conference is organised and run by students. Likewise the news is reported, edited and broadcast by the students.

Students are given training in their various roles. After SPICOL is over, they are given a debriefing where they gain feedback on their performance. The major aim is to provide a realistic environment, forcing USP students to engage in negotiating “deals” which balance national, regional and international interests.

SPICOL engages students in experiences that they seldom get in a normal classroom. There is a “real world” feel to it. It allows the leaders the freedom to gather and consider relevant information, to discuss and negotiate issues in the interests of their own country and the region as a whole, and to come to a consensus decision about dealing with the issue. (SPICOL, 1999)

USP students become the leaders of their country at the conference. From each country, one student takes on the role of head of government (prime minister or president) while others take charge of relevant ministries for the current topic, or issue. The national delegations also include one or two political advisers for each country. Third year students prepared position papers and supplied them to the politicians for delivery at the conference.

For the 1999 conference, the Solomon Islands “prime minister” was a final-year journalism student, Duran ‘Angiki. As

the Solomon Islands was also host nation, 'Angiki also chaired the conference. He suspended his journalist role for the duration of the conference, but later wrote an analysis of the conference for USP's main training newspaper, *Wansolwara*. ('Angiki, 1999) The media liaison officer appointed by the steering committee was also a final-year journalism student, Luisa Tora, who was at the time on her industry attachment with the *Fiji Times* daily newspaper. This was as a result of suggestions from previous SPICOL meetings, as recalled by radio journalism lecturer Pat Craddock:

"Lessons were learned for future exercises. One of the politicians spoke about his problem at dealing with the many journalists who kept approaching him at inconvenient times when he was busy. He also complained about the number of journalists who approached him about the same speech and at different times. This is a valid concern. In the real world, politicians and celebrity figures have their own public relations or press officers to organise briefings for journalists covering a conference. Future exercises of this nature should include a number of press officers with these positions being taken by senior journalism students. It will give them the opportunity to see how the media puts pressure on politicians and to give them training in media 'guard dog' behaviour". (Craddock, 1999)

Tora "managed" the radio and newspaper reporters — and also still found time to file stories herself on the conference for the major Suva commercial radio station, *FM96*. The conference steering committee had no problem with this dual role of their media liaison officer.

Making the transition from a photocopied newsletter in 1998 to a fully-fledged web offset newspaper publishing in partnership with one of Fiji's three daily newspapers in 1999 was a major challenge on several fronts. The first problem was cost. The *Daily Post* editor, Jale Moala, kindly consented to publishing the liftout editorial section produced by the USP students as a "newspaper within a newspaper" in its 10,000 print run for no charge. (Fiji's *Daily Post*, 1999) Instead, the *Post* relied on advertising to partially offset the cost of producing the pages. This was particularly generous of the *Daily Post*.

The newspaper has struggled financially over the past few years and before the May 1999 general election, the Government took a controlling 44 per cent interest. However, a promised injection of capital and upgrading of facilities has not yet happened. Editor Moala explained to the author: "We see *Spicol Daily* as a way of improving the quality of students through practical experience and we would benefit through the graduates

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we hire.”

Secondly, the tight publishing schedule. The conference ran every evening between 6pm and 10pm. The *Daily Post's* last copy deadline was 9.30pm. For the second-year students, mostly with little experience of working against daily deadlines, they needed to report and write the stories, and the student subeditors had to produce their PageMaker 6.5 camera ready pages on tabloid (A3) printouts by a deadline of 9pm. Then the pages were rushed by taxi to the *Daily Post* office's photolitho department in downtown Toorak.

Thirdly, how to cope with photographs. Although journalism students use pagination, digital cameras and scanners for their web news sites back on campus, the *Daily Post* still uses page pasteup technology. So black and white photographs were taken by the students and processed in the newspaper's darkroom for stripping into the pages. In 2000, it is expected the camera ready pages will be downloaded to film at the students' editorial office.

The two-page daily liftout featured a background “Issues” feature article written by final-year students on a Journalism Research course with the rest of the space devoted to hard news by second-year print and online students. A total of 23 students were involved in producing the newspaper. Examples of their stories include:

Tuesday, September 21:

Pacific faces threat (deputy director-general Dr Jimmie Rodgers of the Secretariat for the Pacific Community warning about the “threat” of a dramatic rise in populations)

Solomons PM tells of “home grown” policy

Solomons panpipers wow crowd

Palau sends leader for first time

Issues: New crunch point for the Pacific (on population)

Background: Forum leaders provide model

Wednesday, September 22:

Media slammed on reports (population reporting in daily newspapers treated as “non issue”)

Asia ‘lesson for Pacific’

Organisers flip to damage control mode

Fiji's disabled people face tough conditions

Leaders praise Rodgers' talk

Issues: Urban drift for the bright city lights

Thursday, September 23:

NZ 'bias' attacked over migrants
 Economy, crime, politics 'drive out Indo-Fijians'
 'Angiki slams new policies
 Teachers told step up sex education
 Issues: Why parents find sex a forbidden subject

Friday, September 24:

'Crisis' keeps out Cook Is mission
 Group plans boycott of Indonesian goods (over East Timor)
 Historian calls for greater local power
 Issues: Male role models fail in promoting safe sex

In the final edition, the students decided to publish an editorial summing up the conference. Under the headline NEEDED URGENTLY — SEX EDUCATION, the editorial said:

"Several important issues regarding the Pacific Islands were the focus of the week-long "speak-all" (SPICOL) conference at the University of the South Pacific.

Issues ranged from restrictive and discriminatory policy in New Zealand to sex education in the Pacific.

Sex education in schools was quick to gain criticism.

But one needs to understand the importance of teaching youngsters about the "forbidden" subject...

With the rapid increase in teenage pregnancies and the high number of reported cases of STDs among the youth, it is high time parents lifted the lid of silence about sex.

A plea to parents and teachers — do not axe sex education."

Finally, host nation Solomon Islands "prime minister" Duran 'Angiki stated in his own assessment after the leaders had met in a weekend retreat in Pacific Harbour to draft the conference communiqué:

One of the challenges that SPICOL leaders also failed to see was the politics of the issue of population control in the Pacific. For different nations of the region, the issue would have a varying monetary impact. Factors like land mass and population density would mean extra dollars.

In this scenario, regional countries should not be forced by aid donors and foreign financial institutions to impose an unnecessary "clampdown" on population growth that would forever handicap them.

Although the outcome of the 1999 conference itself might have been rather bland in the end — 'Angiki berated his own

Conclusion

colleagues over the failure to produce a more inspiring communiqué — for journalism students it was a powerful, even exciting, experience. Young student journalists gained the experience of sustained media coverage of a large event lasting a week. Their bylines were in a national daily newspaper for the duration of the conference.

At many universities, student journalists usually work only on single assignments or sporadic news articles. However, this week of high pressure journalism at USP has become a remarkable learning curve for students — and complements their major training newspaper, *Wansolwara* (published twice a semester), rather well. Working on *Spicol Daily*, the students were covering stories breaking every half hour or so. Also, students had to cover several speeches and presentations a day. They needed to select their stories and news angles quickly. But their dilemma was not to lose sight of the balance needed to fairly represent the views of twelve Pacific nations.

In a South Pacific context, it is often difficult for young journalists to forget their strong hierarchies, extended family ties and constraints, and community and political obligations. Using this simulation methodology, students were able to learn how to ask difficult questions of political leaders without feeling intimidated. Their confidence and skills gained in covering SPICOL should carry them a long way in their future journalism careers. ■

Notes:

1. Cook Islands, Fiji Islands, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Nauru, Niue, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tokelau, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu.

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