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Student perceptions of journalism as an occupation: the view from the front of the class

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Abstract

News media managers routinely complain that university journalism programs are out of sync with practice. Yet their views are not always shared by either academics in journalism programs or journalists. This raises questions about how the views of journalism held by journalism students are formed. What students are exposed to during their studies exercises a major influence on their perceptions. Information was collected from students about (a) mainly classroom learning, (b) industry internships and (c) a voluntary cooperative activity. Their feedback indicated that, while overlapping, each experience illuminated a somewhat different journalism "reality". This suggested that if students were exposed to a range of experiences of journalism, they would form differing opinions of the occupation; that work integrated learning (WIL) in particular would help them make sense of various journalism "realities", and that more research is required into this aspect of journalism education.

In March 2012 the associate editor of *The Australian* newspaper reignited an ongoing debate over the nature and quality of journalism education in Australian universities (Stewart, 2012). The intervention, ostensibly prompted by academic responses to the Finkelstein Report (2012) on media regulation commissioned by the Australian government, was redolent of the 1990s Media Wars in which practitioner-academics accused scholars from media, communication and cultural studies of imposing themselves and their theoretically-driven ideas on the journalism curriculum (Flew, Sternberg & Adams, 2007, pp.3-6). The thrust of the case was that journalism programs in Australian universities had become hopelessly divorced from the world of practice (Winch, 2012). However, as Bacon (2012) pointed out, the case against journalism programs was largely prosecuted by "media managers" in whose journalistic products there was declining

interest, particularly among the young, but who believed that journalism was experiencing no more than a temporary adjustment as mainstream models were revised for the digital age (Curran, 2010, pp.464-465; Rideout, Foehr & Roberts, 2010, p.2). The defence was mounted mainly by "liberal educators", convinced that a renewal of journalism was in the making, and that universities had a central role to play in this renaissance (Curran, 2010, pp.466-467). While these cadres of media controllers and academics wrangled over the issue (see Bacon, 2012; Simons, 2012), those in whose interests they were supposedly acting – students and working journalists, the majority of whom, Simons (2012) calculated, were graduates of university programs in journalism and related fields – were left essentially voiceless (Christensen, 2012a).

Journalists were likely to hold quite different views of the condition of journalism from both media managers and liberal academics. On the whole they feared that the occupation had entered a possibly terminal crisis (Curran, 2010, pp.465): or, as the general secretary of the International Federation of Journalists put it, 'Journalism is on its knees' (White, 2010) with reductions in employment overseen by managers being perceived as fatally corrosive of journalism's quality (Edmonds et al, 2012; Oriella, 2009, p.1). Much of this anxiety, which has been particularly evident in the US, was captured in a number of books written by journalists, starting with the critique of Kovach and Rosensteil (1999, pp.6-8) that a withdrawal of investment in journalism created a vacuum which was filled with "cheap" alternative content, which the British journalist Nick Davies (2008) called "churnalism". Journalism students did not appear to share this pessimistic view, however. While journalism jobs were being lost and debates erupted over the dumbing-down of journalism (Beecher, 2005; Niles, 2012; Young, 2010), enrolments in university journalism programs increased (Alarcón, 2012; Anon, 2008; Vlad, Becker, Vlad & Kazragis, 2011; Christensen, 2012a & b; Mangan, 2009; Mick, 2012). This apparent disjuncture raised questions about the ways in which students negotiated the perhaps conflicting "real worlds" of journalism study and journalism practices.

Previous research (Bjørnsen et al, 2007; Paschalidis & Milioni, 2010) suggested that journalism students were divided between pragmatists, realists and instrumentalists on the one hand, and idealists, dissenters and critics on the other. Some journalism educators (albeit from different perspectives) were concerned that university programs fostered idealism at the expense of exposure to the mundane condition of journalism practice (Baines & Kennedy, 2004, pp.104-105; Hirst, 2010), and that a latent disconnect between students' perceptions of journalism and

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the external "reality" arose when student interest (in the field) prevailed over "industry demand" for journalists (Alysen, 2007; McAllister, 2012). Practical experience of journalism had the potential to act as a corrective, however, as it cultivated a more pragmatic view (Bjørnsen et al, 2007, pp.23-24; Conway & Groshek, 2009, pp.478-480).

There was fairly consistent evidence that students' orientations to journalism were shaped by what they engaged with – informally as well as formally – during their learning experiences, irrespective of whether they were exposed to normative or alternative views of journalism (Santos-Sainz, 2012; Schoon, 2012). They were particularly prone to take on board views of journalism promoted normatively within the broader culture (Mellado et al, 2012), and the more they were presented with journalism orthodoxy, they less idealistic they tended to be (Bjørnsen et al, 2007; Paschalidis & Milioni, 2010; Splichal & Sparks, 1989). Therefore, it seemed that the blend of critical liberal arts and practice-focused utilitarian learning which lay at the core of journalism education might particularly influence students' perceptions of the external world of journalism (Bromley, 2011, p.105). This paper explores the ways in which experiential learning outside the classroom in one Australian university journalism program bore on students' understanding of the contemporary condition of practice.

Student perceptions

Obijiofor (2005, p. 194) noted that journalism students held "a broad range of assumptions and ideas about professional expectations, such as what journalism entails, what journalists do" which were largely "unrealistic". A number of plausible explanations for such misconceptions have been suggested. Splichal & Sparks (1994, p.198) concluded that students' views were shaped mostly by individual circumstances. Bjørnsen et al (2007, pp.23-24) identified factors such as having a parent who was a journalist, gender, and whether students had completed a degree prior to enrolling in a journalism program as influential. Sanders et al (2008, pp.148) concurred that students were likely to bring their attitudes into journalism study. Nevertheless, experiences with journalism practice promoted an enhanced understanding of journalism's condition – either negatively (poor pay, low status), or positively (the role of the Fourth Estate) (Hanna & Sanders, 2007, p.409) – possibly because such opportunities had the potential to be "defining moments" (Conway & Groshek, 2009, pp.478-480). Similarly, Paschalidis & Milioni (2010, pp.14-15) found that socialisation into journalism, whether occurring in the classroom or in the workplace, moderated students' strongly idealistic and critical views of the occupation.

What students appeared to learn was the inevitability of the requirement to conform and to be realistic about the limited opportunities which existed to challenge current practices. Bjørnsen et al (2007, pp.23-24) also concluded that experience of working in journalism tended to inculcate a more pragmatic view of the occupation. Far from all students accepted this: as UK students moved to graduation, the willingness to go along with the realistic expectations of first job destinations declined (Hanna & Sanders, 2007, p.413). Furthermore, some reported that lecturers "quashed idealism ... [with] dire warnings about the professions: it was tough, ruthless and competitive" (Cokley & Ranke, 2011, p.172).

Not surprisingly, then, students held ambivalent attitudes towards journalism. They might feel that the courses they completed were helpful to their future professional development while at the same time expressing dissatisfaction with the program they were enrolled in (Obijiofor, 2005, pp. 203, 206 & 208-209). Nor did their views always coincide with those held by outsiders; for example, while 76 per cent of graduates from one journalism school in New Zealand believed the program prepared them "very well" for work, employers were disinclined to recruit from among them (JTO, 2006, p.9). Cushion (2007, pp.428-429 & 431) noted the absence of any agreement across the academy, journalism and the media about how journalism schools should function, and a lack of transparency within schools about the nature of their programs. The suggestion was that students were uninformed about both journalism programs *and* journalism practice (McAllister, 2012).

A number of suggestions have been made as to how journalism students might arrive at more grounded and consistent understandings of journalism. They have included recognising the multi-faceted nature of contemporary "journalisms" (Arthur et al, 2007); adopting "new approaches" involving experimentation (Harrington, 2008); embracing other disciplines (Tumber, 2005), and developing "independent, entrepreneurial approaches" more in line with contemporary practices (Baines & Kennedy, 2010). In sum, "to expand ... conceptions of what constitutes journalism and how to practice it" (Mensing, 2010, p.10); for journalism schools to cease being the "'guardians" of tradition (Harrington, 2008, p.405), and to drop "the mask of authority" derived from the occupational experiences of instructional staff (Ricketson, 2005, p.5). O'Donnell (2006, pp. 24 & 31) called for a shift of attention away from both "traditional, industry-oriented ways of judging journalism education ... [and] approaches that focus on the nature and quality of students' learning experiences" and instead to concentrate on "those who

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aspire to become journalists … those who make it into the industry with a journalism degree and those new entrants who make it their business to review, extend, improve or challenge prevailing professional practices and journalistic conventions". Students and graduates ought to be acknowledged as "key stakeholders in both journalism education and the future of journalism" (see also Splichal & Sparks, 1994, p.5).

Most of these ideas flew in the face of persistent critiques from media controllers that journalism programs ought to be more – not less – reflective of orthodox practices. Stewart (2012, p.15) complained of "a widening rift in Australia between those who practise journalism and those who teach it". Experiential learning, particularly through work placements and internships in newsrooms, supposedly more convincingly inducted students into mainstream journalism, making the abstract concrete. Burns (2002, pp.12-14) argued that a process of critical reflection embedded in routine practices, blending liberal arts and professional learning, both obviated the need to negotiate any theory-practice divide and more accurately represented the ways in which working journalists made decisions in everyday circumstances. Thomas's (2008, p.64) survey of internships in New Zealand revealed a total absence of student reflection on their experiences, however. Patching (2001a & b) questioned the value of some experiential learning: even in propitious circumstances students could be treated as no more than "cheap labour". The exigencies of turning out a product might subsume the learning process (Patching, 2001a, pp.134-136). Internships could lead to "unrealised expectations" (Patching, 2001a, p.139; Patching, 2001b, p.9). Experience did not automatically translate into grounded learning, and could itself sustain or even create misperceptions of journalism (Thomas, 2008, p.67).

Journalism internships and work integrated learning

What might have appeared to be a set of simple, inter-related bifurcations between training and education, between theory and practice, and between the classroom and the workplace, was complicated by "new realities" in both higher education and the wider economy (Abeysekera, 2006, p.7). The first was "a new breed of student … disengaged customers, for whom knowledge is increasingly a commodity to be purchased for the best price with least effort". The second was "a new form of institution … whose imperatives are cash flow and reputation management" (Harrison, 2010, p.23). This led some to contend that universities unscrupulously leveraged journalism's popularity as a field of study to over-recruit students in order to secure additional tuition fees, and then fobbed them off with inferior programs (Christensen, 2012a; *The*

Australian 2012). Finally, economic change – from the global financial crisis through the collapse of traditional media to the creation of knowledge economies – led to fewer mainstream employment opportunities but also a "long tail" and the potential for "greater intellectual content and cultural possibilities than before" (Abeysekera, 2006, p.8; Christiansen, 2012a; Cokley & Ranke, 2011).

The most visible and traditional form of experiential learning in university journalism programs has been the workplace internship. Even so, a survey of 25 Australian university programs found that internships were rarely compulsory elements and were mostly offered as electives (Adams & Duffield, 2005, pp. 12-13 & 25). Nevertheless, Patching (2001a, pp.129-130) noted that journalism educators were "always on the lookout for appropriate work experience or internship opportunities for their students". Most journalism schools had formal arrangements with usually local media, and utilised additional special and periodical events into parallel experiential learning opportunities outside the classroom. Internships provided students and employers with a test-bed for both technical and employability capabilities. Forbes (2009, pp.2-3) found that journalism students met employer expectations in the area of technical skills but lacked employability skills – namely, initiative, confidence, enthusiasm and collaboration (p.4). A wider survey conducted by Austin and Cokley (2006, p.74) identified "new recruitment pathways" into journalism which refocused employers' attention away from traditional technical journalism skills to a more diffuse range of social competencies (p.87).

The deficiencies of internships included the failure to meet objectives of integration of theory and practice or to achieve a synthesis and application of classroom learning in the transition to the workplace through blending: they often involved no more than "doing work" (Lee, 2003, p.179; Rosenberry & Vicker, 2008, pp.269-270; Smith, 2012, p.248). In journalism programs, such activities were used primarily to socialise students unproblematically into a narrow band of mainstream mass media environments (Josephi, 2009, p.52). They appeared not always to be meaningful to the majority of students (Thomas, 2008, p.66). Furthermore, students had to weigh the value of internships against competing opportunities and demands, such as study abroad, seeking higher grades, part-time work, and so on (Choi, 2008, p.6). Nevertheless, Australia, in line with other similar countries, invested considerably in experiential learning as a key element of contemporary university education (Alpert, Heaney & Kuhn, 2009; Orrell, 2004,

p.1; Patrick et al, 2009, p.3). A clear distinction has been drawn, therefore, between "doing work" and work-integrated learning (WIL) (Smith, 2012, p.247).

Traditional internships were classed as "value added" exercises in which the students participating were regarded as workers or observers of the workplace, whereas WIL was viewed as a "stakeholder" opportunity in which the students were treated as learners (Orrell, 2004, p.2). Although technically, WIL could describe "a range of approaches and strategies", it was essentially focused on the integration of "theory with the practice of work within a purposefully designed curriculum" (Patrick et al, 2009, p.9). Smith (2012, p.250) suggested that WIL ought to demonstrate, *inter alia*, authenticity and integrative learning objectives, assessment and support to provide students with "personally meaningful and relevant learning within a particular disciplinary framework". WIL was about "the *educational* benefits for students" (Patrick et al, 2009, p.17 – emphasis added).

The research site

At the university where the present research was undertaken, prior to 1971 experiential learning was superfluous as all students were practising journalists. Subsequently, experiential learning in the undergraduate journalism program went through extensive change in five phases, which we have called *volunteerism, industry replication, professional simulation, workplace internships* and *voluntary cooperation*. In the 1970s and 1980s *volunteerism* was driven by the radicalisation of students (Holdsworth & Quinn, 2010, p.116). Often with the encouragement of academic staff but without formal recognition in the curriculum, journalism students took leading roles on the university student newspaper and an on-campus radio station. Occasionally they produced their own publications. From 1986 these activities were diverted into *industry replication* through the establishment of a departmental newspaper which, among other things, at its zenith raised $100,000 in advertising revenue. Students continued voluntarily to produce content for community and public broadcasters. Sustaining regular content production proved to be impossibly resource hungry, however, and was replaced with *professional simulation* by which students were required to submit class assignments with a view to publication or broadcast (see Hilton, 2010). The alternative to all forms of campus-based experiential learning were *workplace internships* which were introduced in 1995, preceded by a trial. Particular emphasis was placed on students' portfolios of work which were assessed for credit. Initially, the scheme was restricted to 15 students each semester. In 2010 the undergraduate *workplace internship*

courses attracted across two semesters about 10-12 per cent of potentially eligible students, and the numbers had declined by about a third over a few years.

Former academic staff told us that this progression of work-related activities reflected a desire to demonstrate that students could do "real", as opposed to student, journalism. However, what seemed to be lost in these endeavours were some of the key qualities of voluntarism and co-operation, such as heterogeneous grouping, collaboration, autonomy, equal participation and positive interdependence (Jacobs, 2004, pp.413-414; Johnson & Johnson, 1998, np; Steel et al, 2007, pp.331-332). They tended to valorise and mimic the steeply hierarchical, competitive and closed mainstream media newsroom. An internal review of a short-lived on-campus integrated news operation which was intended to coalesce all of the approaches noted that the imperative to produce output deflected from learning. Nevertheless, the preferred attributes, which mapped more completely on to teamwork skills as defined by employers, were not easily developed through classroom activities (Volkov & Volkov, 2007, pp.60-61).

Service learning, particularly in an area which matched students' interests, was one pedagogical approach which was used to deliver many of these positive outcomes, especially when supported with reflection (Astin et al, 2000, pp. ii-iv; Flournoy, 2007, pp.53 & 56). Along with syndicate-based peer learning, it was introduced into the curriculum in the communication program rather than journalism. The objectives of these initiatives were clustered around the creation of overlapping and inter-related learning communities and communities of practice which promoted interdependence and critical thinking, and fostered commitment through blended learning, personal development and civic engagement (Hubbert, 2001, p.3). Service learning arguably provided a bridge from workplace internships to voluntary cooperation (Brisbin & Hunter, 2003, p.469). Despite some inexactitude in its precise definition (Butcher et al, 2003, p.191; Corbett & Kendall, 1999, p.67; Hayward, 2000, p.2; Kronick, 2007, p.299; Panici & Lasky, 2002, p.113; Sophos, 2004, p.168), the common features of service learning, drawing on Dewey, are learning activities outside the classroom for credit, some form of civic engagement, and reflection on learning (Giles & Eyler, 1994; Van Wynsberghe & Adruske, 2007, p.350).[1]

The next iteration in the process was the establishment of online spaces for student work with the capacity to host multiple modes of work-related activity. Originating in *professional simulation* as a place for posting student assignments, an online streaming facility rapidly

assumed the additional function of a *voluntary cooperative* learning site, attracting contributions in its first year of operation from 120 students, some of whom were not enrolled in the Journalism program. The streaming audio space (followed by a planned streaming video facility in 2012) was student managed and attracted hundreds of hours of voluntary student contributions. Traditional *industry internships* continued, but a new range of distinctive opportunities was negotiated between staff and industry, and on a purely extra-curricular basis, to provide supervised, one-off openings: most were heavily over-subscribed. A resurgence in *volunteerism* also occurred with students working in community and alternative media. This provided an opportunity to acquire perceptions of journalism from three student perspectives – exposure to classroom instruction, experience of workplace internships and co-operative volunteering – and to test whether these influenced students' understandings of journalism practice.

Method

The data in this study derive from an action-research model, in which educational interventions are evaluated for their contribution to subsequent iterations of the curriculum – the action research spiral (Lopez-Pastor, Manjas & Manrique, 2011; Moghaddam, 2007; Tichen & Manley, 2006; Stockhausen, 1994). The sourcing of data from a single institution is validated using the principles of single case research design, as defined by Kazdin (2011). The research garnered the views of 99 students. Ninety-three were undergraduates in the same Bachelor of Journalism program in 2009-2010. Six were enrolled in a Master of Journalism program in the same period. A survey was conducted among 70 undergraduate students in their final year of study, who were asked a series of closed questions about their educational experiences. This was a repeat of a survey first completed in 2004. Student responses to questions about the future and functions of journalism were arrayed across a five-point Likert scale (strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, strongly disagree). Students were invited to identify their preferred employment outcomes in terms of the major mainstream media opportunities (print, television, radio) and undecided. The response rate was 100 per cent. A convenience sample of 11 undergraduate and three postgraduate students who completed workplace internships at mainstream media were interviewed, and their responses which focused on their motivations and learning experiences were analysed. The interviews were unstructured and more journalistic than social science oriented. Students were encouraged to talk about their experiences with few

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prompts apart from a general opening question about how they had found the experience. The sample represented about 14.5 per cent of students completing internships for course credit between July 2009 and June 2010. Finally, 12 undergraduate and three postgraduate students who volunteered to participate in a special international on-campus event in May 2010, to work cooperatively on providing content for both audio streaming and radio broadcast, were asked for written qualitative feedback on their experience. They were prompted by eight open-ended questions. All 15 responded, and their answers to two of the questions ("Why did you put your name forward [for this activity]?" and "What did you learn?") were analysed in relation to their evolving perceptions of journalism.

There were considerable limitations to the research design. The sample size was small. Even so, it was possible that the populations overlapped. Anonymity meant we could not determine this, but it was extremely unlikely. All the responses were drawn from a single institution in Australia, and may reflect institutional and/or national peculiarities. Despite anonymity, the proximity of academic staff may have influenced how students responded. We could not control for all conditions – whether students endured boring lectures or were energised by exciting tutorials; experienced sleepy country newspaper or fast-paced metropolitan television newsrooms; or whether the situations they found themselves in closely matched their personal learning and career ambitions. There was no test for inter-coder reliability of the analysis of qualitative responses to control for interpretive bias. However, the number of such responses (fewer than 30) was small enough for them to be "read". The objective of the study was to gather students' unmediated perceptions, without attempting to predetermine them, for interpretation within the frame of scholarly debate around the relative values of different learning environments, and how those perceptions might influence their understandings of journalism practice. The data were not used statistically, except illustratively, but heuristically.

Responses

Three sets of responses were collected.

Survey of final year undergraduates

The proportion of students planning a career in journalism on completion of their undergraduate studies had grown significantly among this group between 2004 and 2010 – from 46 per cent to 61.4 per cent – with fewer undecided (24.3 per cent – down from 32 per cent). Nevertheless, nearly a third still remained unclear about their preferred employment destination.

Of those choosing an option, those preferring print rose from 48 per cent to 54 per cent. This equated to 37 per cent of the total sample. A preference for online fell from 15 per cent to 8.3 per cent, or 4 per cent of the sample. Interest in jobs in television (22-23 per cent) and radio (14.5-15 per cent) remained about the same. These represented 11 per cent and 7 per cent, respectively, of the sample as a whole. All the same, negative views of journalism were more evident. The number of students disagreeing that journalism "defends the public interest" almost doubled (from 12 per cent to 23 per cent). Those who disagreed that journalism "exposes lies" rose by 70 per cent, from 10 per cent to more than 17 per cent. There were corresponding falls in the support for the propositions that journalism did defend the public interest (70.7 per cent to 59.9 per cent) and exposed lies (75.6 per cent to 52.8 per cent). Moreover, confidence in these ideas had declined markedly from 14.6 per cent and 12.2 per cent, respectively, to just 1.4 per cent in both cases.

Conversely, however, there was a large increase in the proportion of students who believed that journalism was not "just another form of entertainment" from 17 per cent to nearly 36 per cent. Only slightly fewer (41.3 per cent compared to 46.3 per cent) agreed with the suggestion. The overall numbers of students sitting on the fence on all of these issues remained the same, although indecision about whether journalism exposed lies doubled to 30 per cent, and those undecided about whether journalism was just another form of entertainment fell from 36.6 per cent to 22.8 per cent. The responses indicated that this group of graduating students maintained traditional career aspirations focused on mainstream media, but were unsure about the role of journalism. Only around a half believed journalism was characterised by its orthodox values, and they were not very confident about that. Up to a third were undecided.

Interviews with interns

Interns identified four major motivations for undertaking formal workplace-based experiential learning: getting practical know-how; making contacts; building a reputation, and assembling a portfolio of work. Interning students appeared to see these experiences as stepping-stones to first jobs in mainstream media. The learning experiences they reported reflected the tensions between relative autonomy in journalism ("I was able to do my own stories"; "You got into the action right away") and corporate newsroom hierarchies (the imposition of editorial values, styles and agendas, or working to "company policy", as one put it). Most interns seemed willing to comply: only two specifically reported that work they had submitted had been "toned

down" or had not been published, and one explained that she found interning in commercial television was like working in "a straightjacket".

A small number of reflections concerned what the interns viewed as a lack of creative opportunity: "it was not as creative as it is even at uni[versity]", one said. In smaller newspapers in particular interns spent most, if not all of their time deskbound, often rewriting media releases. Work intensification was also a recurrent theme with interns discovering that they to complete up ~had~ to eight stories a day or work long hours. "I didn't really prepare for that much work," one reported. Nevertheless, there was almost complete acknowledgement that the internship experience built enthusiasm and confidence. There was almost no concern with ethics. One student mentioned being "accountable to an audience" as being different from completing a class assignment. Another reported without any critical comment that the weekly free newspaper she interned on was "not uptight about getting the quotes absolutely right". The overall picture which emerged was of somewhat naïve students who were accepting of the constraints of working in mainstream media journalism as a condition of pursuing paid employment in the same "real world" environments. It was a price worth paying.

Feedback about voluntary cooperation

The special event volunteers described motivations for taking on the task which were both similar and different from those reported by interns. Like their intern counterparts, they valued applying what they had learnt in class, enhancing their technical and occupational skills (interviewing, managing technology, working to deadlines) and meeting journalists. However, they were less driven by employment outcomes as such, and more motivated by idealistic objectives, such as simply taking part ("getting involved"; "taking an active role … rather than being a spectator"), and gaining access to those whom they considered to be "model" practitioners. One reported that "it was a great opportunity to meet people who had not spent their journalism career pushing their cameras in Britney Spears' face". They said they improved their skills but also learnt an orientation to journalism which they believed was characterised by dedication, determination and "passion". The general consensus was that the experience had been affirming of the value of journalism. One wrote that it had "opened by eyes to … the risks that journalists are willing to take in order to get their message across. It really made me appreciate media professionals and the courage they show in doing their job. It has inspired me to … seriously consider a career in the field".

In summary, voluntary cooperation seemed to bolster idealism among journalism students, but not to the extent that it completely supplanted instrumentalist objectives. They were pragmatic idealists. It may be that the nature of the event was as, if not more, influential than the voluntary cooperative activity. It is also possible that the predominance of postgraduate, chiefly international, students among the respondents was also a factor. Nevertheless, these volunteers demonstrated a noticeable degree of enthusiasm for journalism (as opposed to working in the media).

Discussion

Against a backdrop of an apparently continuing, if not growing, aspiration to seek careers in mainstream media, and especially print, journalism students seemed to be divided between the more pragmatic and pragmatic idealists. They were both sceptical of, and somewhat confused about, the claims of journalism to do public good. This appeared to be reflective of their predominantly classroom-based learning experiences at university. When they ventured into the workplace in mainstream media, they found themselves to be at least a little unprepared, but willing to accept the limitations, which they duly recognised, of working in such environments. This may have been reinforced within university programs, resulting in a narrow vision of employment opportunities (Cokley & Ranke, 2011, p.172). Their responses confirmed the findings of studies conducted outside Australia that journalism students were divided between those who tended to be critical of journalism orthodoxy, and those who were prepared to conform, and that workplace experience fostered pragmatism over idealism. By comparison, voluntary cooperation boosted idealism but not completely at the expense of pragmatic concerns. Both interns and cooperative volunteers found exposure to the working world of journalism enthusing, and a way of keeping at least one eye on the employment market. In this regard, interns seemed to be better placed as they more strongly reported acquiring employability skills. On the other hand, cooperative volunteers were eager just to participate and drew inspiration from role models. As one put it,

I have felt for some time that as a journalist today your job is to watch the wires and just edit those stories for your region. The people at the [event] showed that real action journalism is still alive and that makes me want to strive harder to be at the top of my field so I can join the ranks of those that are fighting to keep that truth alive.

Interestingly, despite many hours of experience in mainstream newsrooms, no intern reported finding a journalist who inspired them. They appeared to be more satisfied with the humdrum. This sat somewhat uneasily with preferences for careers in print which Bjørnsen at al (2007, pp.11-12) found students associated with the most prestigious roles in journalism.

The same study suggested that work-related experience was a significant factor in shaping the views of students who used the experiences to become better informed about the "realities" of journalism (Bjørnsen et al, 2007, p.23). Our evidence suggests that those "realities" are likely to differ with the nature of the experience. If only one "reality" is believed to have value, then students might be directed exclusively to one corresponding kind of activity. The responses of undergraduates, who had mainly (perhaps exclusively) experienced learning in journalism in the classroom, and interns, who had been exposed to routine newswork, indicated a general willingness to conform to the single "reality" of the orthodox, mainstream newsroom, rather than challenge it, notwithstanding their own doubts, their relative ignorance and their recognition of its shortcomings. This was driven in large part by instrumentalist employment aspirations. However, when exposed to another "reality", the cooperative volunteers were equally accepting and responded differently, even though they were also concerned, in the background, with career opportunities.

While this study provided only indicative results, which we have interpreted in particular ways, it did intimate that, if it is believed that there is more than one journalism "reality", and students learn substantially from WIL, then journalism schools which provide experiential learning opportunities founded in WIL which allow students to participate in a range of situations beyond the industrial work site ("doing work"), and support those as *learning* experiences founded in WIL principles, will produce graduates with more than a single view of what journalism is. Thornton's (2010, pp.4-9) study of US interns suggested that a new "reality" was evident even in mainstream newsrooms making them "learning organizations" characterised by collaboration, expanded personal responsibility, enhanced individual autonomy, and teamwork.

The "reality" of education is that there are multiple sites of learning not only in and during formal university activities but before, external to, and following university. There is a need to know more about the role WIL can play in higher education journalism programs, and we hope that this study will prompt more research into how these activities can both empower

students through reflective learning, as well as being cognizant of the practical limitations of work – "to guard against … only reproducing occupational capacities … and failing to develop the kinds of critical capacities that are required for professional practice" (Billett, 2009, p.282). At the very least, voluntary cooperation, as an alternative and adjunct to the standard workplace internship, may stimulate enthusiasm ("passion") in journalism students and inspire them in ways that the classroom and internships don't. Surely that can't be a bad thing – even if it doesn't always satisfy mainstream media controllers that journalism students know about journalism.

These conclusions can be only tentative given the limitations of the research. As we have acknowledged, the interactions with students were designed primarily to inform teaching staff and improve curriculum. More specifically targeted research of greater numbers of students in more diverse contexts would test some of our suggestion that a greater focus on the varieties of experiential learning among journalism students has a direct causal relationship with their perceptions of journalism as an occupation.

Note

1. While service learning has been introduced to applied communication programs (Corbett & Kendall, 1999; Liu, 2011; Panici & Lasky, 2002; Warren & Sellnow, 2010), there are very few reports of service learning projects specifically in journalism (Gong & Hu, 2010).

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