



## The Change Makers Project: A service learning approach to journalism education in Australia

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### Abstract

In recent years the relevance of tertiary journalism programs and courses in Australia has come under question. In a bid to make journalism education more practice-focused, universities have introduced work-integrated learning (WIL) models as a strategy to give students real world experience. However, this paper argues that the dependence on WIL models has come at the expense of other pedagogical approaches such as service learning – which provides practice-based experience while at the same time contributing to community-building endeavours. This paper explores the value of service learning initiatives in journalism education and documents how Change Makers, a project developed and piloted at the University of Queensland since 2014, has demonstrated an alternative approach to experiential learning. This multi-awarding winning journalistic enterprise has been acknowledged for its journalistic innovation and its role in covering complex multicultural issues in one of Queensland's most diverse ethnic communities.

### Key Words

Service-learning, journalism, Change Makers, education, multiculturalism, communication

### Introduction

In recent years the relevance of tertiary journalism programs and courses in Australia has come under question. The media industry has long queried the appropriateness of university-based journalism programs and has argued there is a disconnect between the approach of the academy and the realities of the industry. These differing views reached a climax in 2012, when a series of editorials published in *The Australian* newspaper argued that journalism programs in Australian universities were 'out of touch' (Cullen et al 2014). However, this conflict is not just limited to a battle between industry and the academy. Journalism students have also been critical of journalism programs and courses questioning their relevance, the kind of content being taught, but more importantly how it's taught. Anecdotal evidence from unsolicited first year student responses has long criticised the use of task-driven assessments with seemingly little linkage between current and emerging trends in the journalism industry. Students have highlighted the need to value-add to their student experience by facilitating opportunities to have their work published. It would be fair to say that, given the rapid changes to business models and the decline of print journalism in the global media industry, journalism and journalism education have been in a state of flux during the past five years; this has left many journalism educators in a quandary as to how to deal with these changes.

To respond to some of these issues, journalism programs at most Australian universities during the past decade have been developing and fine-tuning advanced level, practiced-based courses aimed at ensuring students receive on-the-job practical training before graduation. This Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) model, as it has become known, has been embraced in general by students and welcomed by the media industry. However, this paper argues that the proliferation of WIL courses and the desire to give students hands-on practical experience has come at the expense of other pedagogical approaches. This has included service learning – an approach which provides practice-based experience while at the same time contributing to community-building endeavours. This paper explores the value of service learning initiatives in journalism education and documents how a project, that has been developed and piloted at the University of Queensland since 2014, has successfully presented an alternative approach to experiential learning. This service learning project, called Change Makers, has become a multi-awarding winning journalistic enterprise that has been acknowledged for its journalistic innovation and its role in covering complex multicultural issues in one of Queensland's most diverse ethnic communities.

### Background

The first phase of the Change Makers' Project was launched in April 2014 as a participatory journalism project funded as part of the Australian Federal Government's *Diversity and Social Cohesion Program*. The project's aim is to build greater connections and cross-cultural understanding between the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, Pasifika, Australian and newly arrived refugee communities in Logan City, south of Brisbane. Woodridge State High School received \$5000 to fund the magazine that was conceptualized as a tool to explain issues of diversity within the school community. Woodridge State High School is one of Australia's most ethnically-diverse high schools and has students from more than 70 different ethnic communities. This hyper-local journalism project was established with a working committee of youth from the secondary school community partnered with university students studying journalism at the University of Queensland. The school students' idea was to call the publication 'The True Story of Woodridge' and to base all stories in the magazine on the themes of hope, pride and inspiration.

The project has sought to use innovative methods to tell complex stories using photography, artwork and illustrations. The magazine format was identified by the school students as the most appropriate medium to tell these stories given the diverse literary levels of the students and the broader community. The students initially said they hoped the magazine would capture the attention of Woodridge's youth, engaging them to better understand those around them, and in the process combating stereotypes, stigmatisation and racism.

Teachers from Woodridge State High School approached the then School of Journalism and Communication at the University of Queensland to assist in the production of the publication. Eight journalism students (from first to third year) have been recruited each year. However, rather than presenting the project as an opportunity for students to receive course credit via the Work-Integrated Learning model, it was decided the project was more suited to a service learning model because of its strong community engagement focus. Bringle and Hatcher (1996) argue the academy provides multiple methods of experiential learning; however, these projects typically focus only on extending a student's professional skills and do not emphasise to the student, explicitly or tacitly, the importance of service within the community or lessons of civic responsibility. They argue that service learning is an educational experience in which students participate in organised service-based activities that meets a recognised community need and that students reflect on the activity to gain a further and deeper understanding of discipline and civic responsibility (1996, 222). Jacoby defines service learning as:

*A form of experiential learning in which students engage in activities and address human and community needs together with structured opportunities intentionally designed to promote student learning and development. Reflection and reciprocity are key concepts of service learning (1996, 5).*

Therefore, service learning can be seen as a three-fold pedagogical approach that involves experiential learning where professional skills are applied, community service where a social or community need is addressed, and critical reflection from the student participants to identify links between classroom theory and practice. Jacoby's approach to service learning has been adopted as part of this study. Her study importantly recognises that for the success of service learning projects the human and community needs addressed by the service learning project are needs that

are defined by the community. This is in-line with the process facilitated through the Change Makers' Project. The student participants in the Change Makers' Project define and take the lead in determining the stories they want told. This important process of ownership is facilitated through the use of culturally-sensitive newsgathering techniques to ensure that the cultural and ethnic diversity of the partner community is reflected accurately and meaningfully. Ultimately the kinds of stories and the way that they are told seek to unite, educate and inform the immediate school community but also the community-at-large. Kendall supports this process: "All parties in service learning are learners and help determine what is to be learned. Both the server and those served teach, and both learn" (1990, 22). A key component of this learning is through critical reflection of the practice, work and processes undertaken during the service learning project. Dewey (1933) defines this process of reflexive thinking as: "Active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it tends" (1933, 9). In the Change Makers' Project a key component of this reflexive practice is conducted as part of the launch of the magazine. At the launch both the server, and those who have been served, present speeches highlighting what they have learnt, experienced and gained from the service learning activity. The outcomes of this process vary greatly between individual participants in the project; however the outcomes, which will be discussed later, are exclusively and overwhelmingly positive. Jay argues that such outcomes are not uncommon:

*The service learning experience should be focused on transforming the students' capacity to observe and critique their own cultural identities and subject positions; this focus will help prevent them from falling into the usual reactions of ethnographic shock and condescension, or into sentimental narratives or reactionary attitudes (2008, 262). However, structuring and building a framework and culture for service learning is pivotal in ensuring the outcomes are not trite or self-serving.*

## Literature review

The links between service learning and its role in communication and journalism programs remain largely under-researched in Australia. Although there has been growth in service learning among tertiary communication schools in the United States, the place of service learning as a key pedagogical approach remains on the periphery. Jacoby (1996) recognises that service learning 'is a long way from the centre of the academic centre stage in higher education'. For those who do embrace service learning, the results are normally positive. Bringle and Hatcher (1996) argue faculty who use service learning discover that it brings new life to the classroom, enhances performance on traditional measures of learning, increases student interest in the discipline, teaches new problem solving skills and makes teaching and learning more fulfilling. The Change Makers' Project supports Bringle and Hatcher's outcomes and has demonstrated that service learning is tailor-made for journalism studies. It is also tailor-made for complex situations. Sturgill, Motley & Saltz (2013) found, in their study of communication students engaged in a service learning project among people living in poverty, that the project affected the attitudes of the students toward representations of the poor in the media, as well as conceptions of themselves as storytellers about the poor. Proponents of service learning argue service learning is not just serving, as a student would when they are working as an intern, and nor is the learning only cognitive: it is learning that grows from application and reflection (Oster-Aaland et al 2007, 349). Service learning is also based on both moral and pedagogical imperatives. Keith points out:

*The issue is how to support relationships that are not only not exploitative, but contribute something of value to all participants, understanding that these kinds of relationships and their attendant experiences are also responsible for a deeper kind of learning (2005, 14).*

Importantly Kendall (2011) and Russo (2012) both recognise that journalists often do a poor job when reporting those who are economically disadvantaged. Russo's study is particularly insightful because it found this disconnect with vulnerable communities stemmed largely from the fact university-educated journalists had not spent much time around 'working-class' people during their studies. Therefore, service learning projects such as Change Makers provide a framework for students to engage in experiential practice that has immediate influence through the publication of a magazine and also long term impacts in terms of exposing students to diversity and how to report, represent and frame that diversity. Jay (2008) argues that because service learning links universities with surrounding communities it has the capacity to raise issues about race, multiculturalism and social justice. However, it is important to recognise that not all experiential learning is necessarily equal or beneficial. In his seminal work on experiential learning Dewey argues:

*The belief all genuine education comes about through experience does not mean that all experiences are genuinely or equally educative. Experience and education cannot be directly equated to each other. For some experiences are mis-educative. Any experience is mis-educative that has the effect of arresting or distorting the growth of further*

*experience. An experience may be such as to engender callousness; it may produce lack of sensitivity and responsiveness. Then the possibilities of having richer experience in the future are restricted. (1938, 25)*

Dewey's argument is important and relevant to experiential learning within the communication and journalism disciplines. For example, whereas WIL is important for professional development and building critical industry networks, service learning is integrated into the notion of civic responsibility and community service. Eyler and Giles Jr (1999) recognise seven distinct characteristics of service learning education:

1. Increased sense of citizenship (values, skills, efficacy and commitment to social responsibility);
2. Development of stronger analytical and problem-solving skills;
3. Enhanced personal development (self-knowledge, spiritual growth, finding reward in helping others);
4. Increased leadership skills;
5. Greater cultural awareness and tolerance;
6. Enhanced social development skills;
7. Improved interpersonal development (working with others, communication skills).

Service learning is a potentially important pedagogical approach, particularly in the fields of communication and journalism studies, because it provides an alternative pathway for using journalistic skills. Therefore this level of engagement between the University of Queensland and the Logan City community to promote service learning provides a more holistic learning environment for the students, ultimately giving them a greater opportunity to not only develop their professional skills but also to develop personally.

Although some Australian universities do provide some service learning initiatives in small community-based projects the Change Makers' Project is unique in several ways. Firstly the project is run as an extra-curricular initiative that operates during the teaching semester, outside allocated classes. Students who are part of the Change Makers' project 'volunteer', on top of the classes they have already enrolled in. Secondly, the students participating in the project do not receive any academic credit for their degree by participating in the Change Makers' Project. The project is run as a complete service model, by which students provide their skills and expertise. This goes against most communication-based service learning activities based in the United States that involve giving academic credit to students (Oster-Aaland et al 2008). Thirdly, the students experiment with radical newsgathering techniques and storytelling methods as part of the project. This has enabled participatory models of newsgathering and storytelling to be trialed and used as part of a radical education experience in a cross-cultural setting, so giving the students a more comprehensive journalism experience.

This paper uses a reflective practice methodology as a means of exploring the effectiveness of the project. This is highly applicable to service learning, given the importance of reflection as part of this learning approach. Jasper contends:

*Reflective writing as a method in itself, as a data source and within the analytical processes, can be used as a technique within the philosophical and theoretical framework adopted by researchers, and that it is the responsibility of the researchers to ensure that the methods used within these are true to these frameworks (2005, 249)*

Reflective writing as data falls into two categories: (1) The use of journals, logs, speeches, biographies and critical analyses and (2) The reflective writing of the researcher such as field notes that document feelings, dialogue with themselves and ideas (Jasper 2005, 253). Both of these categories have been used in this paper.

## Serving, learning, reflecting and innovating

The Change Makers' Project is a unique learning approach in journalism education in Australia. However, the distinctiveness of the project is not limited to its pedagogical framework. The project has also sought to embody innovations in journalistic practice to best serve the host community. The distinctiveness of the Change Makers' Project will be highlighted in three areas: innovative newsgathering practice, consultative community interaction and critical learning reflections.

### Innovative newsgathering practice

The Change Makers' Project seeks to tell complex stories. Woodridge State High School is not only ethnically-diverse, but the students at the school have complicated stories and backgrounds. For example, the school has a high proportion of students who are either asylum seekers or refugees, with some still in community detention. This adds to the complexity of storytelling with those still seeking asylum unable to be legally photographed, named or identified in any way through the storytelling process. This has resulted in the journalism students, who are part of the project, being trained in creative strategies to tell these stories, while gaining valuable problem solving experience. Rather than rely solely on interviews to garner stories, the journalism students in Change Makers have used drawings, paintings and art as stimuli to empower students at the school to tell their stories. Figures 1 and 2 are demonstrative of this. Figure 1 was produced by a Burmese student at the school; she had fled her homeland with her family while being pursued by the military. The bust, which features paintings of the student's home village, also demonstrates the tragedy of her escape: the student has broken a hole in the side of the bust to expose protruding intestines, graphically representing the injuries a person from her village suffered after stepping on a landmine. The use of this creativity provided authenticity to the newsgathering process and greatly affected the journalism students. One of the journalism students reflected: "After hearing the stories of the wonderful Woodridge students, it opened my eyes to the strength these kids have shown and puts my own problems in a perspective that's larger than myself." (Reflective speech Jade Horrobin 2014)



Figure 1: A bust painted by a School student reflecting on their escape from the military in Burma.

The painting in Figure 2 was produced by another student at the school; she is from Africa and has received asylum in Australia. The self-portrait demonstrates how the transition to a new life in Logan City had affected her. She said the flecks of colour on her face represented her culture being drained from her body as she integrated into a new life and a new culture in Logan City. Although this student felt thankful to be safe and secure in Australia, she found the loss of her culture difficult to reconcile. To reinforce her passion and to personalise the artwork, the student used strands of her own hair, which she attached to the painting. A journalism student reflected on the impact the student's painting had on her:

*A few of us were taken into the art room, to take a look at some very impactful and reflective portraits the students had painted...Each painting on its own was an emotional journey for me, but seeing all of the paintings together really took me aback...I was particularly touched by one painting, the image of young African girl. With long, weaved hair flowing down her shoulders and a strong pose, this young woman's self-portrait said only one thing to me – determination. The way her eyes were depicted had a fire I've never seen before in an artwork, and left me drawn to the strength, the independence and the determination she encapsulated (Reflective speech Jade Horrobin 2014).*

The artworks were used as a stimulus to enable the students to speak out about the issues concerning them. This not only proved to be a powerful innovation to explain the true stories of Woodridge, but it had a profound impact on the journalism students in the Change Makers' project.

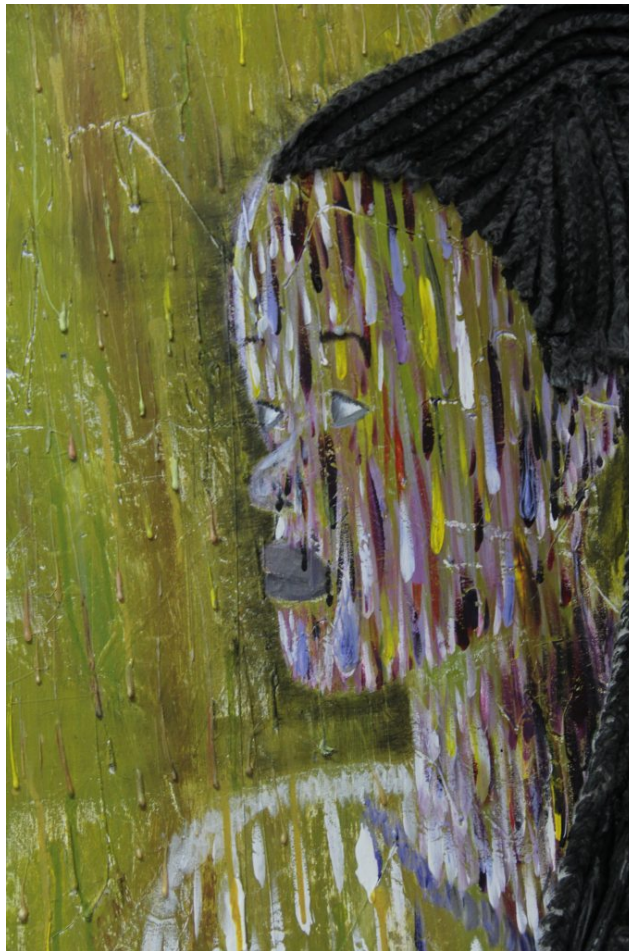


Figure 2: A self-portrait painted by a student from Africa, reflecting on her relocation to Logan City.

The third newsgathering innovation involved the use of 'dream trees' (Figure 3), a figurative drawing designed to facilitate discussion on the issues and stories impacting the school students. This strategy, used in international community development projects, includes a four-step process. Step one involves identifying the roots – the things that are needed to give the students opportunities and protection in their lives. The second step involves drawing a trunk and includes the issues and problems the students currently face. The third step involves drawing the fruit and flowers on the tree to symbolise the ideal situation the students can see for themselves. The final step involves the landscape around the tree, including the things they can do and achieve to bring their goals to fruition (Stephenson 2004, 31). This process, which has been included each year in the Change Makers' Project, ensures the stories the school students want told are included in the publication. This prevents a top-down approach whereby the journalist presumes to know the issues and the solutions. The use of the 'dream tree' strategy was an effective innovation to ensure Kendall's (1990) and Jacoby's (1996) assertion that service learning should provide a basis for participants to determine what is to be learned and discovered through the learning activities; also that the outcomes of the service learning project must be community-driven.



Figure 3: An example of 'Dream Tree' created as part of the story facilitation process.

### Consultative community reporting

In traditional journalism the journalist, for the most part, controls the methods of newsgathering and the way the story narrative is constructed, developed and reported. The news source/s have little say in the way the story about them is written. As part of the Change Makers' Project all students were part of a process of 'informed consent' whereby the stories were only produced and published (textually/visually) with the full consent of the community partner participants. The consultative process was implemented for three main reasons:

1. Most of the story subjects were children under the age of 18. It was important for the school and their families/carers to know and understand what the stories were about before going to press.
2. Some of the stories were highly personal and complex. Some involved sensitive racial and ethnic issues, while others detailed death and trauma. Some of the participants had experienced and survived war, persecution and harm. It was therefore critical that details, facts and sensitivities were checked and permissions were granted before going to press.
3. Visual representations of stories were produced based on the subjects' recollections of facts. Many students had powerful stories of their journey to Australia but no photographic documentation of those journeys. In one instance a journalism student illustrated an asylum seeker boat. (Figure 4) The boat was a representation of the people smuggling vessel one student and her family boarded en route to Australia. The informed consent process was important to ensure that this, and other visual representations, accurately reflected the truth of their experience without misrepresenting or sanitising the facts.

Mainstream journalists often shun the notion of informed consent because they view the practice as compromising journalistic integrity. However, in service learning, particularly in vulnerable communities, informed consent is necessary. This poses a potential professional and pedagogical problem: does this type of service learning accurately reflect 'real-life' practice? However, in recent years, professional journalists have acknowledged the value of informed consent as an important journalistic practice. It is alluded to in their professional code of ethics – where they are told "never exploit a person's vulnerability or ignorance of media practice" to obtain information or interviews (MEAA, 2016). Moffeit and Lombardi (2012) argue that journalists should 'break from routine' and grant the story subject more control over the story process. They say:

*Strive for a delicate approach while staying firm about the need to ascertain certain facts: Mute your inner hardboiled reporter. Put yourself in the victim's situation. How would you want to be treated, tone-wise, manner-wise? Allow yourself to empathise, to search for common emotional ground. Let the victim invite you into their story (2012).*

In the Change Makers' Project this model of informed consent ensures accuracy, builds empathy, respects authenticity and ensures the integrity of pedagogical approach. The importance of this is not lost on the journalism students. In one journalism student's reflection she said:

*As a journalism student, the most important thing I have discovered during the Change Makers' Project is this – I am not the story...The most fantastic thing about this project is that it is not about us. It's not about sales or circulation or clicks – it's about stories. Telling the stories of these students and their communities. Local stories with global significance – that is powerful journalism (Reflective speech Courtney Lawler 2015).*



Figure 4: A representation of an asylum seeker boat en route to Australia.

Importantly, these approaches were also acknowledged by journalism peers. In 2014, the first edition of *Change Makers: The true stories of Woodridge* won the Dr Charles Stuart Prize at the Ossie Awards for Student Publication of the Year. In 2015, the publication also won the Queensland Multicultural Award (Communication and Media). This was the first time a university-based journalism program had ever won the award and demonstrated the significance of the journalism created in the publication. Other finalists at the award included SBS and *The Courier-Mail*. Although the methods applied for newsgathering in the Change Makers' Project are not mainstream, the project has nevertheless achieved mainstream journalistic success.

#### Critical learning reflections

The reflection process in the Change Makers' Project each year involves a public declaration of the learning that has occurred. The journalism students present a speech at the launch of the magazine to recognise the professional, practical and personal learning they have experienced.

These speeches are to the school students, teachers, journalism students and the broader community, including cultural leaders and politicians. They have provided critical insights into the power of this project and the service learning pedagogical approach. Jay says:

*Students in service learning usually go through a stage in which, with an expression of surprise, they articulate a discovery of commonality with the people they have met, and from whom they are supposedly, according to stereotypes, so different. If we use this common ground moment as a developmental stage rather than an end point, and avoid the temptation to criticise our students for naivete, we can channel the powerful positive emotions this realisation brings with it to help students reflect on and analyse the differences they are also experiencing (2008, 264).*

This kind of impact was evident in one student's reflective speech:

*Let me tell you right now that Woodridge is a place that is anything but ordinary. It is inspiring. Upon meeting the children in the Intensive Language Class we learnt that most of them had been in Australia for less than a year and most of them had been speaking English for about the same amount of time. I remember in my teens how I would scoff at other schools that did not perform well academically. I always attributed this to a lack of effort or care for their studies by the students. I now know how untrue this is. The reality of life for many of these students is so complex it is still hard for me to comprehend (Reflective speech Jordan McMullen October 2014).*

The potential benefits for communication students engaged in service learning include: possible career connections, sense of purpose, sense of social responsibility, regard for cultural differences, enjoyable experience, career or vocational clarification and integration of theory and practice (Oster-Aaland et al 2008, 352). These benefits have also been recognised by the Change Makers' students. One student reflected:

*I am inspired by the people that I have been lucky enough to meet through the Change Makers' Project. From Uzbekistan to Africa to India to New Zealand, you have taught me how blessed we are to live in a country like Australia and how much we take it for granted every day. Not only am I in awe of your courage of leaving everything you know and coming to a completely new country, where you don't even speak the language – I am in awe of how you have broken passed these cultural barriers and shown that true friendship knows no boundaries (Reflective speech Alynna Wong November 2015).*

The overall impacts of service learning, manifested through the Change Makers' Project can be summed up in this reflection:

*Woodridge has taught me more than I ever thought possible and has not only changed the way I view my profession as a journalist, but changed the way my life...One of the moments I'll always remember about my Change Makers' journey isn't really a moment at all, it's a lesson. It's a lesson I learnt when I interviewed a young boy from Afghanistan who I'd gotten to know over my weeks at Woodridge. He told me of the tragedies he'd experienced, and yet how grateful he was for his life and his opportunities....Nothing I've experienced in my life so far has changed me as much as this young man has. His passion, his dedication, his resilience, his positivity, his compassionate worldly perspective and his pride in his school encapsulates what Woodridge means to me (Reflective speech Jade Horrobin October 2014).*

## Conclusion

The Change Makers' Project is a service learning initiative that embodies the approach proposed by Jacoby (1996). The project seeks to use service learning as a mechanism to introduce and expose journalism students to the complexity of reporting cultural, ethnic, religious and social diversity. This complexity is unique because it is an immersed hyper-local experiential reporting experience based in a high school. This focused experience not only provides the university students with the opportunity to learn about various innovative methods and styles of storytelling but it also challenges them to confront their own biases and prejudices. The impacts of this project have been mighty. It has produced innovative and quality journalistic outputs; it has had a profound impact on the lives of the Woodridge high school students, as well as the journalism students engaged in the project. It has also informed a broader community about complex cultural and social issues. This Australian-first initiative has demonstrated that journalism is still critical to educating, informing and empowering community. This service learning project also demonstrates that

successful work-integrated learning models, so easily embraced by journalism schools, are not the only experiential learning platform from which a meaningful journalistic educative experience can be received.

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