Integrating industry collaboration into the journalism curriculum

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Abstract

This paper discusses ways in which collaboration between students and external industry bodies can be integrated into the undergraduate journalism curriculum. The paper is based on a case study of the Collaborative Project unit which has been taught in the second year of the BA (Hons) Journalism course at London College of Communication (LCC, University of the Arts London) since 2012. In recent years, the unit has worked with a number of external partners including BBC News Labs, Rough Guides and a number of smaller start-ups as a way of introducing students to the diversity of different workplaces which have come about as a result of the development of digital media technologies, and asks them to critically reflect on issues of collaboration and teamwork in a professional scenario.

Keywords: Collaboration, students, reflection, practitioner, industry, projects.

Introduction

The introduction of the Teaching Excellence Framework in 2017 has reignited the debate over how the quality of university teaching and the student experience is described and measured, just as the introduction of the National Student Survey did a decade ago. Whatever the pros and cons of these devices, journalism educators face a constant challenge to ensure that their teaching is up-to-date and relevant for the current state of the industry, and to meet demands from students for as much experiential learning as possible before they graduate.

The London College of Communication (or LCC, formerly the London College of Printing) has a strong track record in this area, and in 1994, was one of the first courses in the country to launch a live newspaper project which was assessed as part of the undergraduate journalism course (Oliver, 2015). Although it has had many guises, this final major project has been praised by students over the years for the way in which it has prepared them for the experience of working in a live newsroom, and as part of a diverse and multi-skilled team.

The project has not been without its issues, especially the challenge of ensuring that students are fully prepared to take part in a live, team-based, production exercise that takes up half of their final year; this mirrors other concerns about ensuring that students learn how to develop broader experiential skills which are not a formal part of the journalism curriculum, such as team-working, peer review, critical reflection, people management skills etc.

In light of that, the decision by the LCC to introduce a mandatory, 20-credit, second year unit to encourage collaboration offered staff on the BA (Hons) Journalism course an opportunity to introduce students to these broader skills, while also meeting students demands for more chances to interact and collaborate with students from courses other than their own. Initially this was done by working with other courses, but more recently this has been achieved by partnering with industry collaborators who have come into college on a regular basis to provide real-world challenges and mentor students as they work to develop solutions to these.

This paper examines the current Collaborative Project unit as a case study for giving students a wider exposure to experiential, situated learning, as well as developing a broader range of vocational skills which will help them in their final major project and, later, to help them integrate into a professional newsroom.

Academic context

Concepts of collaboration, experience and situated learning have been at the core of journalism education for more than two decades, with calls for greater collaboration being made over the years; journalism education itself benefits from a long-term collaborative relationship with practitioners in industry, many academic publications have discussed the theory and practice of journalism, and it has been shown that cross-disciplinary collaboration can be used to enhance communication skills for all concerned: "Participants reported increased media communication skills, an awareness of the necessity of communicating with other disciplines, and some change in their intended strategies for future projects. Evaluative instruments recorded a high level of student satisfaction with the collaboration" (Kavanagh & Cokely, 2011:3). Similar findings have been demonstrated in cross-disciplinary studies involving scientists and journalists (Canan & Hartman, 2007)

Learning processes in journalism have often used workplace experience, which are described as "contextual, socially constructed, and shaped by a collaborative approach." (Thornton, 2011:132), and this was mirrored in the introduction of team management in many news organisations which

produced "an increased range of problem-solving activities to which interns could be exposed (and in which they were likely to be involved)." (Thornton, 2009:132)

Jarvis discusses the benefits of new practices and opportunities in journalism, suggesting that "networked journalism proposes to take advantage of the new opportunities for collaboration presented by the linked ecology of the internet" (Jarvis, 2011:vii). Indeed he contends that the natural state of the media is "two-way and collaborative" (2011:viii). Mensing (2010:511) suggested a "realignment of journalism education from an industry-centered model to a community-centered model as one way to re-engage journalism education in a more productive and vital role in the future of journalism. A community-centered focus could provide a way to conceptualize a reconstitution of journalism education to match that taking place in journalism beyond the university."

While it resulted from feedback from the students themselves, calling for greater collaboration with their peers and practitioners in industry, the Collaborative Project is also an example of how the situated learning theory can be put into practice, enhancing the pedagogy of journalism education. Situated learning takes as its focus "the relationship between learning and the social situation in which it occurs" (Hanks, 1991:14).

As Paula Vicini contends: "Learners must use tools as practitioners use them and become 'cognitive apprentices' in that discipline's community and its culture" (2003:1); by asking students to participate in a relevant multi-disciplinary project involving collaborative partners from other media disciplines, this helps to develop the notion of communities of practice within journalism and the broader media ecosystem.

As Vincini (2003:1) further noted: "What does this mean for the design of instruction? Learning is driven and best presented through realistic and complex problems that allow learners to learn to think and practice like experts in the field. Content is learned through activities that help solve the problems and not from 'packages' of information organized by instructors. The instructor's role moves from providing and structuring the information and knowledge through lectures and presentations to modeling, coaching, and scaffolding learners as they use information and create knowledge to solve contextual real-life problems. Situated learning environments must support active engagement, discussion, evaluation and reflective thinking. Activities and assignments are often collaborative and group-based."

As Herrington *et al* (2000:8) suggest: "The learning environment needs to provide ill-defined activities which have real-world relevance, and which present a single complex task to be completed over a sustained period of time, rather than a series of shorter disconnected examples," a contention which summarises the approach taken by LCC's Collaborative Project very succinctly, as such activities are at the core of the unit's experiential philosophy.

The Collaborative Project unit also underpins the social aspects of journalistic practice and teamwork in the newsroom. Hung's study (2002) suggests that learning begins when students are placed in a scenario where they have to solve problems; they explore real life situations which focuses their approach on social skills and communication, supported by their existing practical skills, to find a solution to the problem posed, while Hermida (2011:57) discusses "collaboration between professionals and amateurs; participatory journalism, democratizing media conversation".

The unit also focuses on collaborative practice, as summarised by the American Institute for Image Management (AIIM), who described it as "a working practice whereby individuals work together to a common purpose to achieve business benefit" (2010), alongside a life-cycle diagram which allows students a visual and accessible way of seeing the process and using that as the framework for their own reflective writing. This life cycle has also been examined in relation to the broader challenges of higher education (Mutie *et al,* 2015).

Historical context

The Collaborative Project was developed by the University of the Arts London as a generic, 20-credit, second year (level five) unit, which was designed specifically to answer demands from students for more opportunities to work with students from other courses and disciplines. It replaced a 20-credit Elective unit which gave second years to study a subject which was not part of their normal curriculum, where opportunities to work on formal cross-disciplinary projects was limited.

The new unit was first taught in the 2012-13 academic year, and course teams were given a generic unit descriptor, learning outcomes and assessment criteria to work with, but crucially, were given complete freedom on how the unit would be organised and delivered for their students; the only mandatory requirement was that it should be delivered at the same time across the college, the spring term of the second year, to facilitate maximum opportunities for students from a wide range of undergraduate courses to collaborate on projects.

Course teams had freedom to define what constituted a 'collaborative project', and a range of approaches was developed including:

- Working with industry partners to develop live project briefs which the students could work on in groups;
- Project proposals developed with other courses, other universities or research institutes;
- Student-led projects, where the students themselves identified a challenge and developed a solution;
- Tutor-led projects, where tutors identified professional challenges;
- Generic exercises which were not 'real world', and which may have been developed by tutors and/or provided by external sources.

All of these were considered by the tutors in the months before the start of the new academic year, although the final shape of delivery was shaped by the students themselves.

Delivery

At LCC, the journalism tutors teamed up with colleagues teaching Public Relations and Magazine Publishing to develop collaborative opportunities around multi-disciplinary solutions to challenges developed by the students themselves, on the basis that each group should include at least one student from each of the disciplines, and that the solution they developed should showcase each of the students' contributions to the final artifact.

At the initial briefing session in the Winter Term, some students wanted to pitch their ideas for new products to the whole group, and they then encouraged other students to join their project teams. Once the outputs had been identified and approved by the tutors, the teams had eight weeks to work on their projects, which were largely self-managed by the students themselves, but with set classroom and workshop sessions available with tutors for feedback and monitoring. The total direct contact time was 20-30 hours.

The students from the three undergraduate programmes formed into 15 teams of varying sizes, from two to 30 students. The projects largely focused on magazines and websites, supported by social media and public relations campaigns related to the 'launch' of the new product. The artifacts produced by the teams included physical publications as well as virtual ones, often using a mix of traditional print and digital multimedia; some were actually produced and went live, others only

made it as far as the concept stage with folios, flat plans or wireframes. Some teams continued their work after the unit had been assessed, working as entrepreneurs to develop their projects as potential commercial products outside the course.

Examples included a website for science and technology news for children, an online music magazine for students, various lifestyle magazines and websites looking at different niches within politics, culture, fashion, travel and music, and a summer edition of the LCC's existing newspaper, *Arts London News*, which filled a gap in the paper's normal production schedule, and took advantage of an existing arrangement for printing that the course had with News International.

Delivery issues

While the actual development of the students' artifacts went relatively smoothly, and some high quality products were developed by the teams over the course of the term, the tutors quickly came to realise that one of the major challenges in delivering this unit was the logistics of monitoring and organising the teams across three different courses.

Although the UAL had moved from Blackboard to Moodle at the start of the same academic year, the implementation of the new virtual learning environment, based on students being members of a single course, meant that it was limited as a way of organising the teams and communicating effectively with students from more than one course. While tutors could be members of multiple course sections on Moodle, using the platform would have meant duplicating every message three times to ensure it reached every student participating in the unit.

In 2012-13, the unit involved around 140 students from the BA Journalism, PR and Magazine Publishing courses; in 2014-15, they were joined by students from the BA Sports Journalism course as well, pushing the cohort up to more than 170 in total. To ensure parity of experience, the teaching team had to adopt an approach that meant all students were given the same access to the same information at the same time, something the Moodle struggled to do without significant amounts of duplication.

The solution was to develop an external Wordpress site (http://collaboratelcc.wordpress.com) where all the relevant information about the teams and their projects could be collated, along with essential details about the tutors, the schedule, the assignment briefs and other supporting material. The additional advantage to this was that the site became a living archive of the projects which

could be used to inform and inspire students who were embarking on the Collaborative Project in subsequent years.

There were other issues in regard to students working in groups, with some seeing an opportunity to do very little work while being carried by the more enthusiastic members of the team; while this happened in a small number of cases, peer pressure usually overcame any difficulties of this nature, and the reflective nature of the assessment meant that as well as the artifact, every individual had to produce a report outlined what they contributed to that output, and on their own performance, so underperformance was managed within the framework of the assessment and its relationship with the learning outcomes.

Feedback and response

Based on the responses to the unit evaluation surveys, the feedback from students about the new Collaborative Project unit was positive, and many welcomed the opportunity to work on their own projects with students from other courses; there were some instances where teams did not perform as well as they expected, but all were able to reflect on that maturely and professionally, both within the workshops and in their assignment reports at the end of the unit.

Some students suggested that while the experience of collaborating with their peers was welcomed, they wanted the opportunity to work more directly with practitioners in industry, which prompted the teaching team to consider ways of developing some project briefs which came from industry, and which were supported by professional mentorship.

With the logistics of organising so many students becoming increasingly difficult, after three years it was decided that each course would go its separate way, and the Journalism tutors began to approach news organisations and media companies to try and find potential projects for the 2015-16 academic year.

Industry-focused collaboration

While the original aim of the Collaborative Project unit was to give students the opportunity to work with students from other courses, the new focus for journalism students is on collaboration with professional practitioners and organisations, rather than just other students. The challenge to

the tutors has been to find companies who are willing to put our students into a professional scenario which tests their technical and production skills, and who have the capacity to engage with the students as mentors over the course of the ten-week schedule.

The students are still able to do their own projects, and work with students from other courses to achieve the unit aims if they wish, so that aspect of the original delivery plan remains as an option, and in the most recent cohort, around a quarter of the groups chose to do this. Some of them collaborate with other students, others work with a range of external companies and organisations; this aspect of their project is mandatory, and proposals will not be approved by tutors unless the groups can show that they have some form of external collaboration in place, whether that be with a company, individuals or students from another course or institution.

During the summer and at the start of the Autumn Term, tutors approach a number of potential organisations to take part, either through their own industry contacts, by meeting them at journalism conferences or at networking group events which are held regularly in London. In the first year a total of six organisations agreed to support the project, with a similar number contributing in the second year. These included:

- BBC News Labs, who wanted students to work with them on developing a new interface for their in-house news search and analytical tools;
- Rough Guides, who challenged students to develop and curate a special section on their website, and a published mini-guide, looking at the best beaches around the world, with sub-sections covering the best in a range of countries;
- Tremr, a social journalism platform, who have worked with students in both years to develop special sections (or channels) within their website, allowing the teams to produce and curate content as well as using the platform's management features to build audience engagement with their chosen topic;
- My Perfect Housemate, a start-up website which allows people find somewhere to live based on who they live with rather than the normal criteria of location and price; students were asked to develop branded journalism, multimedia content and a social media strategy;
- Explaain, a web start-up which aims to provide background for news stories based on atomisation of content; they challenged students to develop a mobile version of the concept which would be based on contributory journalism;

- Dawn, a new "travel and adventure" magazine aimed at people who are blind or visually impaired, who asked students to develop features and content which were written specifically to inspire readers to explore and travel;
- Webgaffe, a social media and web start-up looking at correcting mistakes on the internet, from simple typos to fake news.

At the end of the Autumn Term, students are asked to form groups of two to five people, and are given information about the companies who want to work with them, and the challenges that these organisations are setting. The teams then decide whether they want to work on their own projects, or whether they want to work on one of the external projects. In all cases the groups are asked to have two back-up preferences as well, just in case there are any issues with the external organisations, or their own projects, before the start of the Spring Term's workshops.

Whichever option they choose, the learning outcomes are the same, and students are assessed on their ability to:

- Engage in focused research and the application of analytical skills that will assist with the generation of appropriate solutions to posed problems;
- Demonstrate proficiency in the application of subject discipline, sharing and exchanging of knowledge with others on new projects;
- Demonstrate confidence in the communication and presentation of ideas to an identified audience through effective means;
- Evidence the ability to collaborate with those of a different discipline in undertaking a common project, demonstrating an interdisciplinary perspective.

The spring term workshops

The formal workshops begin in the first week of the Spring Term, and run every week for at least two hours on a Wednesday morning. During that time the teams have access to at least one representative from the outside company, along with two tutors and a graduate teaching assistant who can also provide advice and support. Teams who are doing their own projects are asked to use this time to provide updates to the tutors as well, so that their progress can be monitored alongside that of the groups who have external collaborations.

The companies are asked to act as mentors to their teams, so there is scope for the teams to communicate and discuss issues with them outside of the formal teaching workshops, and in some cases, partners have invited their teams to visit them to see their working environment, which serves to deepen the collaborative experience. Other organisations have added their teams to their own project management and communication systems, using commercially available platforms such as Slack or Trello, which also allow communication, progress and content checking, discussion and mentoring through the project. For the teams who are working on their own projects, the tutors act as mentors, providing support and advice, as well as parity of experience.

The schedule for the ten-week term is straightforward: In the first week the students meet their mentors and discuss their ideas with them, so that by the second week, the teams have begun researching and developing their solutions to the challenge they have been set, and, if that solution involves the production of content, they have started planning the production of that content and organised themselves to create and edit it. The aim is to have the projects completed by the ninth week, so that the teams' solutions to their challenges can be presented back to the class, and the mentors can provide formal, professional feedback on what the students have done, and they are asked to provide that in writing after the presentations. The final week is a plenary session to discuss reflective writing and to review the assessment requirements for the unit; the final hand-in is at the end of the third week of the Summer Term. This was chosen for three reasons: to allow their mentors time to provide written feedback, to allow students time to collate their work and reflect on the feedback they have received, and to avoid students being overloaded with assessment points at the end of the Spring Term.

The assessment is in two parts, each carrying 50 per cent of the final unit grade. The first element is the practical solution to the problem that has been posed, either by the external partner or by the team themselves. The assessment brief requires the students to produce this solution using design, media and communication methods which are appropriate to the challenge they have been set and the expectation is that the students will be able to apply all the practical skills they have learned over the previous four terms of the course.

The final form of the practical solution is not specified, and the solution that the students have produced could be anything from a physical magazine or product to a website or a virtual product such as a portfolio of page layouts and plans. Asking the students to produce a group presentation does mean that there will be at least one product that they can submit – the presentation itself –

although students are encouraged to hand in a portfolio of material including plans, sketches, wireframes, storyboards, e-mail exchanges, mood boards and any other products they have created in reaching their solution, as well as the presentation and the solution itself, if it can be handed in. The presentation was also designed to encourage students to think about the creative and collaborative process, and so it becomes a vehicle for curating some of the portfolio of production material as well as allowing them to specify the way the team was organised and how each individual member contributed to the solution.

The second element is a reflective report of 1,000 words which is designed to encourage students to review what they have done both individually and as a team, how they worked together and collaborated with their external partners as well as asking them to consider that process and their own performance critically and asking them to identify what worked well and what could have been improved; where potential improvements are identified, they are encouraged to try and identify ways in which they could have achieved that. This is managed through a series of talking points and questions, which are listed in the assignment brief to provide students with a framework to structure their reflective writing and critical analysis.

Student outcomes

Since the re-organisation of the unit, the majority of students have chosen the option to work with an external company, and have produced a wide range of solutions to the challenges they have set. In some cases the collaborative partners have worked with a single team of students, while in other cases the companies have been willing to work with a number of groups, which sometimes introduces an additional element of competition into the unit.

Projects delivered with external companies include:

- A multimedia documentary on the challenges faced by Syrian refugees in Berlin;
- A curated collection of stories and analysis of black culture in Britain;
- A curated collection of podcasts and articles on a range of contemporary subjects aimed at a youth audience;
- A social journalism project examining the issue of social media bubbles and how students and young people can do more to get outside of their comfort zone;
- A new mobile interface for a start-up social journalism website;

- A critique of a new analytics and search interface for an online newsroom toolkit;
- A brand journalism package and social media strategy for a start-up website;
- A special section, with a range of sub-sections, for a leading travel website;
- A curated collection of articles examining the growing cultural and economic divide between London and the rest of the UK;
- A social journalism project investigating issues around the problems faced by homeless people, and another examining environmental and sustainability.

For some of the students, however, developing their own ideas and then collaborating with students and organisations outside the course (rather than working with one of the invited mentors) remains an attractive proposition, especially for those students who are highly motivated. It is interesting to note that in recent years, more students are developing their own journalistic projects outside the course, even in their first year of study, something that the course team have been happy to encourage as long as it does not affect the student's' studies.

These student-led projects have, so far, included:

- A multi-magazine travel publication, consisting of four magazines in one larger presentation pack, each one focusing on a different city – the group of three students in this case worked with more than 20 other collaborators in four different countries;
- A social media travel campaign in Copenhagen, working with four different travel-related companies;
- A magazine and website focussing on sustainable food;
- An animated documentary on being a first or second generation immigrant in the UK.

Results and feedback

In terms of the student performance, the Collaborative Project unit has come to be considered as a highlight of the second year, with many students providing positive qualitative feedback in the unit evaluation surveys. This is supported by statistical analysis of the unit's results which show that students regular score well above their own average on this unit, as shown in the table below:

Grade difference	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17
+5	0	1	1	3	1
+4	2	1	2	4	2
+3	8	4	4	2	3
+2	15	12	6	9	7
+1	11	16	13	11	8
No difference	7	13	7	10	16
-1	10	4	7	10	4
-2	4	2	3	5	3
-3	2	0	1	0	2
-4	1	0	0	0	3
-5	0	0	0	0	0

	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17
Higher	36 (60%)	34 (64%)	26 (59%)	29 (54%)	21 (43%)
Same	7 (12%)	13 (25%)	7 (16%)	10 (19%)	16 (33%)
Lower	17 (28%)	6 (11%)	11 (25%)	15 (28%)	12 (24%)

TABLE 1: An analysis of the grades achieved for the Collaborative Project unit, and how those grades compared with the student's' overall grade profiles.

From the table above, it can been seen that over the five years since it was launched, the significant proportion of students do better on the Collaborative Project compared to the other units at this level, and this appears to indicate greater engagement, which is supported by attendance figures and anecdotal evidence.

Qualitative feedback to the changes made to the unit, and the introduction of a greater industry focus were also captured in the unit evaluation surveys. Comments include:

"A refreshing unit that allows students to practice something slightly different than what we usually do, and the need for reflection and coming up with an idea."

"Developing teamwork skills - it may be one of the skills you're taught since you're in nursery but it's important to put this into practice when it comes to real life scenarios, which I thought worked well."

"Getting to work with and getting to know other people on the course."

"To get to work with other people rather than individually."

"Working with a team and see what strengths and weaknesses people have and how everyone works through them."

The companies involved have also provided feedback on the unit in their interactions with the students, and for them too, the experience has been a positive one, especially in relation to understanding the demands of a younger audience, which our students represent, as well as learning about how students and journalists related to the latest developments in digital communication, especially social media, participative journalism and extended multimedia such as augmented and virtual reality. In all cases, constructive, critical feedback is used to drive changes in an attempt to improve the student experience year-on-year.

Conclusion

While it may have seemed like a top-down imposition by the university management, the introduction of the Collaborative Project unit gave the course team an opportunity to develop a new approach to teaching a range of professional skills such as team-working and collaboration, as well as allowing students to explore their own ideas and apply the skills they have learned so far to practical, real-world problems.

These projects have also allowed students to explore aspects of journalistic practice which would be more difficult to do in traditional group exercises, especially the people and team management skills which are associated with the working newsroom, such as:

- Commissioning content and managing contributors, including the editing and critique of other people's work, management of deadlines and editorial workflows;
- The curation of content and the importance of this when done in parallel with the creation of content;
- Project management and professional communications within the team and with external collaborators;

- Copyright and content rights, including the negotiation and management of these with third parties and collaborators;
- Business planning and logistics, especially with regard to travel and maintaining professional relations with outside parties;
- Digital media and asset management, especially with regard to sharing of content for editing and approval, version control and editorial sign-off;
- Client development and confidentiality, especially where a company is still in a pre-launch situation.

While many of these attributes have often been a feature of the course's Final Major Project in the third year (Level 6), the Collaborative Project has given the course team an opportunity to give the students some experience of this in a relatively controlled environment, and this, coupled with the Industry Work Placement, which follows immediately after the Collaborative Project, gives the students a more structured progression, building directly on the skills taught in the first four terms, and so providing them with a better preparation for both the Final Major Project and for their subsequent transition into professional journalism.

The course team are continuing to develop the unit, and know that maintaining these levels of student engagement will always be a challenge, especially in regard of finding a suitable range of industry partners for the students to work with. Some of the companies we have worked with say they have benefitted from participating, especially with regard to ensuring their products and services are engaging with a young audience, and some have asked to come back again in the future, while the course team are already trying to find new companies who may bring fresh challenges for our second year students next year.

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Biography

Russell is Senior Lecturer on BA (Hons) Journalism at London College of Communication, teaching across all three years of the course on practice and journalism theory; this includes overseeing the digital element of the Final Major Project, the website for *Artefact* magazine (artefactmagazine.com) and the second year units on Collaboration, Social Media and Data Journalism. Russell joined LCC after 21 years in broadcast and multimedia journalism, starting in BBC local radio before joining BBC News Online to develop interactive television services for the BBC News Channel, which won an RTS Award for Innovation in 2002, and programmes including *Question Time, Newsnight* and the 2001 General Election results special. In 2005 he joined Al Jazeera in Doha to help launch the new English channel and develop its digital strategy. He is currently studying for a PhD researching the media archaeology of interactive television.

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