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Teaching Converged Media to Arab Students: University/external partnerships in social media campaigns

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Abstract

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University/external partnerships in social media campaigns

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Introduction

Using converged media means producing a story for distribution on several platforms including the traditional print newspaper, broadcast radio and television, plus the Internet for blogs, news websites, and the increasingly popular social media.

Communication training limited to one style such as radio production or print production is less valuable than training that encompasses all styles (The Missouri Group, 2010). The new communication professional requires a strategic focus as well as basic technical and content skills that incorporate converged media. As outlined in previous research studies (Aviles & Carvajal, 2008; Chung, 2008), professionals already in the middle of their careers find it difficult to adapt to the new converged media, a challenge for industries in western countries as well as Arab countries (Handy & Auter, 2011).

With increased demand for professionals capable of producing content for all platforms, universities should prepare their students accordingly. This paper provides a case study of an interactive program to ease female Arab students into learning converged media. The teaching model utilizes Al-Issa's study of Arab learning styles and Vygotski's scaffolding theory. The program was in the College of Communication and Media Sciences at Zayed University in Dubai, United Arab Emirates. The students were female Emirati nationals within a year of graduation.

Converged Media Education

Most university communication courses are moving towards incorporating converged media into their curriculum (Dailey, Demo, & Spillman, 2005; Lowrey, Daniels, & Becker, 2005). A major impetus for including converged media is to meet industry requirements.

Journalism is increasingly using converged media technology and content to gather and report information to audiences (Straubhaar, LaRose, & Davenport, 2012).   Although converged media is still being called "the wave of the future" in newsrooms (Missouri Group, 2010, p. 33), it is no longer considered new. For the past decade, employers have valued employees willing and able to work in the new media environment (p.33).

Professionals in other media disciplines such as public relations and marketing also must understand and master converged media (Rodman, 2010). Public Relations students are told to consider converged media and social media in communication plans. "Long after the buzz surrounding the terms is gone, the reality for public relations will be to include strategies that encourage or build on these tools" (Wilcox & Cameron, 2009, p. 361).

Converged media is divided into three segments: technology, industries, and content (Rodman, 2010). Converged media requires teaching students skills in journalism as well as digital technology such as producing podcasts, editing and uploading video clips, and writing online text with hyperlinks, as well as recording with video, audio, and photographic equipment (Strong, 2008). New information has to be produced and uploaded "at increasing speed" (Daily, Demo, & Spillman, ¶2). The issue of speed is important to this study because it is not easily taught in traditional university classrooms in 50-minute classes.

Converged media includes social media, another name for interactive Internet sites that develop a relationship between the producer of information and the recipient. This is true in journalism when a news agency asks its online readers and viewers to comment, and for public relations departments of companies and government agencies that use Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube for dialogue with the public.

Social media is what its name implies – social communication - originally developed for recreational use. However, for many younger people, it has become a key source of information. This is particularly true in the Arab countries that now have the digital infrastructure for people to use social media (Dubai School of Government, 2011).

Although several studies have explored various methods of teaching converged media (Bhuiyan, 2010; Dailey, Demo, & Spillman, 2005; Strong, 2008), few are based on teaching Arab students, who require a customized approach to satisfy their unique learning needs. These needs have been documented by Al-Issa (2005).

Additional challenges arise with teaching converged journalism in the United Arab Emirates because journalism itself is a fairly new industry. Daily newspapers are less than 50 years old (Kirat, 2005), and literacy has only become common in the past 40 years (Hammoud, 2006). The country itself celebrated its 40th anniversary in 2011. Media have more constraints than in Taiwan, New Zealand, or North America. Therefore, students do not have local role models among journalists, and becoming journalist is not something that most Emirati parents would consider appropriate for their daughters.

Despite the relative newness of literacy and formal education, citizens are rapidly catching up with other parts of the world (Strong & Hareb, 2011). Emiratis are flocking to universities, which are free for them. Emirati females in particular are becoming well educated, and make up 76 percent of university students (Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, 2012).

Digital fluency is very high in the country. A recent government survey showed that 79 percent of the population has regular access to the Internet, and half of them use social media (TRA, 2010). Emirati females are particularly digitally fluent with easy access to computers and software (Piecowye, 2003; Walters & Jendli, 2006). A 2011 study of young female Emiratis showed that one-third had two or more mobile phones, and were heavy users of Twitter (Strong & Hareb, 2011).

Scaffolding Pedagogy

For the past 70 years academics have accepted the theory of scaffolding as an effective method for learning new skills (Donato, 1994). Scaffolding, first devised by Leo Vygotski in the 1930s, requires the teacher to build on what the student already knows. Learning moves cohesively from existing knowledge to new knowledge. The theory posits that teachers should act as coaches to develop learning activities whereby students "can participate in, and extend, current skills and knowledge to higher levels of competency" (p 4). Tasks are interesting, fun, and simple enough to maintain the students' interest, and they can gauge their work against the ideal (Wood, Bruner & Ross, 1976, cited in Donato, 1994.).

Successful scaffolding requires the teacher to provide the student with ample preparation so that she can successfully perform the new skills or incorporate the knowledge. As McKenzie reports in the chapter " Scaffolding for Success" (1999), scaffolding should provide clear instructions and clear purpose, keep students on task, offer assessment to clarify expectations, deliver efficiency, and also reduce uncertainty, surprise, and disappointment.

Using scaffolding to teach Arab university students has been successful (Bacha, 2010), but most studies have been in other cultures. A study of scaffolding among American university students learning a second language found that working in a group setting further enhanced learning. Students working in groups and talking among themselves to complete the assignment learned much more than a control group of students that completed their assignment individually (Donato, 1994). Peers automatically used scaffolding to help each other learn new skills, "the rich fabric of inter-individual help that arises in social interactions" (p. 52).

Teaching converged media to students in the United Arab Emirates brings a new twist to scaffolding. Whereas students in other regions may have a strong grounding in journalism and need to branch out into digital platforms, UAE students already have strong skills in digital technology, but need to branch out into professional newsgathering. On top of this, many Emirati students speak the local version of Arabic as their first language, but their classroom studies are entirely in English. Therefore, content both in terms of media format and language can be more of a challenge than the technology.

Students also require a shift in mindset because they consider digital information dissemination as recreation. Teachers criticize them if they try to use laptops or mobile phones in class. Students also feel they know how to use digital technology and do not readily see it in terms of professional engagement.

Arab Learning Style

Arab students have a different learning style than western students (Oxford & Anderson, 1995; Reid, 1987), and all students learn more effectively when they are taught in their own style. When teaching style conflicts with learning style, students tune out, filtering out the information (Moore, 1999).

According to Al-Issa (2005) there are two fundamental cultural aspects of Arab learning style that differ from western learning style. The first is that Arab students tend to value collectivism meaning they prefer working towards a goal for the group, rather than an individual goal. This is manifested in the lack of competition for grades as individuals, but an eagerness to work for recognition of a group project. Al-Issa says that individual competition is considered showing off, and "harmony and interdependence of group members are stressed and valued" (p. 153).

The second significant characteristic of Arab students identified by Al-Issa is that they prefer that communication be contextualized, meaning they don't rely solely on words for new knowledge. Students want to experience the knowledge in a physical context or to internalize it. Al-Issa contrasts this to western culture where students are used to being taught by direct communication, which includes reliance on lectures and instruction manuals. Al-Issa calls this the high-context learning style of Arab students and the low-context learning style of westerners.

The concept of high-context versus low-context cultures, developed in 1976 by anthropologist Edward T. Hall, applied to education contends that while low-content teaching relies on direct communication, high-context is indirect (Wilson B., n.d.). High-context students process new information from social cues and from non-verbal activities (Twu, 200O). Other characteristics of high-culture students are that they learn better in groups and in an environment where they can discuss and actively practice what they are learning (Haynes, 2001).

Female Arabs learning converged media face additional problems. Some are restricted in travelling outside the university campus without a chaperone. Others are not allowed to be photographed or to appear in media, thereby preventing them from doing pieces-to-camera or on-camera interviews as part of their media training, if the recordings may be seen outside the campus (Shakir, Shen, Vodanovich, & Urquhart, 2008).

These characteristics of teaching female Arab students were taken into account in a learning project that relied on student groups working in real-life situations. As a group and with faculty chaperones, students worked at various week long events gathering and producing converged media information. The students refined skills and knowledge gained in the classroom, but also learned important concepts of converged media in the commercial world, or independent businesses, or government departments. The project centered on social media content providers, as described below.

Scaffolding University Lectures to New Media Business Tools

This project was conducted with communication majors at Zayed University, all female students, United Arab Emirates nationals who wear the dress of long black abaya cloak and shayla head scarf. Most are in their early 20s.

Using the scaffolding education model, teaching converged media starts with what they already know and are comfortable with, the technical side of converged media. With minimal class instructions, most students are quickly proficient in social media use and digital production: video and audio recording, editing, and uploading. Many own their own equipment and software. Most have Internet access at home, as well as on campus. Most have mobile Internet on their phone devices.

The next step was to lead the students from the comfort of their technology to gathering converged information with it. Classroom teaching concentrated on the skills and theories of information gathering. This included learning news judgement, issue of accuracy and objectivity. The classroom was also the venue to show students the level of quality expected in their photography, video shots, audio editing, online writing, and hard and soft article leads.

The final step in the scaffolding model was for the students to take their new knowledge into the professional world and meet the challenges of newsgathering outside the security of the classroom. This involved the university's social media content production team. The university and several Dubai-based organizations formed partnerships for the students to produce content for their social media platforms.

The team included students who worked outside the university and outside class hours on professional projects with extremely tight deadlines. About 70 students contributed to the team, although only 20 to 50 students worked together at any time on an event.

The challenging learning step for the students was to gather information from people who had not been contacted by the professor, and upload it to a corporate website for a global audience. Producing professionally acceptable content for an organization's social media websites satisfied the students' need to put new knowledge into context, and learn from social cues, as outlined by Al-Issa.

On the other side were six organizations that wanted quality content for their websites, particularly social media. They found it difficult to produce large amounts of new and relevant content continuously during major events while their own staffs were fully employed with other activities.

Each organization had an event featured on its website. Five were week-long international conferences or festivals, and the sixth was an eight-week long call for nominations to an awards event. All were in the city of Dubai. Two organizations were government departments, two were quasi government entities, and two were foreign organizations.

Each organization created a designated YouTube channel, Facebook page, Twitter account, and, in one instance, a blog site on the parent organization's website. Each provided a workspace with computers and equipment at the event venue for the students. They also gave the students access to all parts of the event and to celebrities or VIPs for interviews.

The students would cover the event by interviewing speakers, participants, exhibitors, organizers, or visitors on video. They also took still photographs. Photos and text were immediately uploaded to Facebook; video and identification were uploaded to YouTube; and links and direct information were tweeted on Twitter.

Students produced a total of 200 hours of video, and 285 edited clips posted online. Directly after the events, there were more than 50,000 views from 51 countries. The assessment from the organizations was positive. They all expressed keen appreciation of the students' work and asked for the student social media content production team to work with them again.

Elements of Success

The most successful project was for the Road Transport Authority (RTA) which hosted the international transport providers (UITP) conference in late 2011.   It was held at Dubai's World Trade Center, and was the second-largest conference ever held in Dubai, with more than 2000 participants from more than 100 countries.

In a series of focus groups with 40 students, the consensus was that the RTA conference was the one where they learned the most, in addition to enjoying it. The professor in charge also found that when the students returned to the classroom after the RTA week, they had a better focus and understanding of converged media strategies and skills. Therefore, this study concentrates on student attitudes relating to this particular project.

Prior to the content production week, the students researched global issues on transport provision and details of the exhibitors and speakers confirmed for the conference. Students were invited to the RTA Head Office where they met in a boardroom with the authority's public relations team. The university provided the recording equipment, protocol for sending messages from the official conference Twitter account, and a customized video clip to start and end each upload.

The students were rostered into 6-hour shifts during the week, depending on their other classes. At the beginning of each shift, students would determine among themselves (with faculty guidance) general assignments such as who would conduct an interview, who would operate the camera and sound, and who would edit and upload to the Internet. The expectation was that every students was able to take any of the various jobs.

The student teams provided a daily average of five video interviews each which were uploaded immediately to the designated YouTube channel. They tweeted throughout the day, with the Twitter Internet site shown on large monitors around the venue.   Tweet messages were often about the interview currently being uploaded to the internet. Conference participants forwarded the tweets to their offices around the world.

Feedback from students was very positive, and they requested more opportunities to work in an independent team. It is sometimes difficult to determine if students enjoy an off-campus learning opportunity simply because it is something different, or if they truly extend their learning. This study used focus groups and individual interviews to explore how much students were able to learn while working in social media teams.

The research participants were students who had worked at most of the five events. Interviews were conducted the following semester, after the students completed the course to ensure there was no perceived linkage between opinion and grades.

The participants were asked what helped and what hindered the learning process while working in the social media content production teams. Responses were both verbal and written; thus no quantitative data are available.

Learning Outcomes

What did they learn? They enjoyed the activities simply because they were away from the campus, but the series of focus group and individual interviews teased out what the students learned that added to what they gained in the classroom.

Several learning outcomes would never be available in the classroom. One was that newsmakers are more likely to give a student an interview, and a good interview, when the student acts confident. A second was that when students used professional-looking equipment (using a separate microphone instead of an internal one), the newsmaker talked to them in more detail and made more newsworthy comments. A third was that using professional equipment (external microphone, SLR digital camera, and/or higher level video) looked more professional on the internet, and also required less post-production correction.

Students recounted specific instances when they tried something they had not done before. For example, one student interviewed a municipal authority manager from a western country. The interview was on stage with many people watching, and the topic was moderately technical. "I was so scared. I never thought I could interview someone like that on camera," the student said. She explained that having the professor in the room made it easier. "She gave me confidence, and then I did several more interviews like that later. I loved it."

Another said her first interview was with an Asian businessman. "I think he was as nervous as me. That made me feel better," she said. Another student admitted, "I was never before so careful about getting good sound recording and watching the lighting."

One student noticed the poor sound quality in the large cavernous conference hall and with her own money purchased four special lavaliere microphones for the team to use at the RTA conference.

A professor said it was enlightening to watch the students meet the rapid deadlines and observe how they were able to turn around a story from interview through editing and writing text to upload in a short amount of time. "In class these same students would be often late in turning in assignments, but in the peer-group team environment, they became conscious of the need for deadlines," she said.

The media skills learned during the event fell into two categories: new information that they thought they couldn't learn in a classroom and, second, information they had been told before, that was reinforced by the conference work. See **Table 1**

Students learned from mistakes that if they didn't check their digital equipment and review the information they received immediately after an interview, they had to return to the newsmaker. The problem was compounded when the lower-quality interview was rejected by team members trying to upload it.

Table 1: Media principles learned on the social media content providers team

Previous learning reinforced	New principles learned
Importance of open-ended questions	How to quickly and effectively identify news angles
Writing for internet and usage of social media	Preparation of question lines for different people
Developing question lines to elicit interesting quotes	Importance of correct spelling
How to position camera and microphone	Confidence in approaching strangers
Importance of meeting rapid deadlines	How to effectively get a newsmaker to be interviewed
How to make complex technical information interesting for the general audience	Importance of reviewing your data BEFORE ending the interview

Evaluation was also provided by the anonymous social media audience. The students received instant feedback if they uploaded an interesting interview with a conference speaker, as it received more "hits" within a few hours. In this way, they learned the value of selecting WHO they interviewed, as interviews with more important people got more "hits." Global social media feedback operated with on Twitter. The more newsy tweets were retweeted by conference participants.

The students also felt they were treated with respect at the conference, and several students said that they were not treated as though they were doing student work.   The RTA recognized the students as professional communicators rather than "only students."

1.Top leaders of the RTA and the UITP made themselves available for interviews.

2.The students' identification tags to gain entrance through security were labelled Press. The students felt this was an honor and more valuable than being identified as Student, Staff, or Volunteer.

3.They were given a comfortable and large workspace. It was a quiet corridor, but it had been set up with tables and seating, giving the students a quiet place to work and a venue for potential interviewees.

4. The RTA staff liaised directly with the students, giving them ideas for interviews and checking that facilities were satisfactory. It was a partnership.

The students who had been on several social media teams previously facilitated by the University were asked what made them rate the RTA event the highest. Table 2 reports those mentioned most often in two distinct themes: those that gave the students autonomy over their work and those that gave the students confidence that they could produce professional work.

Table 2: Characteristics of a successful off-campus project

Autonomy	Programme for Success
Students supervised and edited	Having professional, but small, equipment, ensured quality sound, video, photographs
Students decided who to interview and the question line	Urging from faculty/supervisor to push themselves into more challenges
Students were given full access to every place in the conference venue, including executive board room.	Professors were available but not leading
Students had the opportunity to do all jobs	Having the organisation acknowledged their expertise
Students solved own technical problems (best lighting, interesting background, less noisy).	Having specific Twitter guidelines set by the professors and organisation (which avoided potential problems)
Editorial guidelines were flexible	Being treated as professionals, not "only" students

Discussion

It is clear that the partnership between the university and external organizations was successful and that the social media content team was popular. The students, the professors, and the professionals involved expressed satisfaction with the outcome. As shown above, it was also a valuable method for students to learn skills required in converged media.

Part of the learning project's success was its adherence to Arab-style teaching methods, as outlined by Al-Issa. The two main issues he raised were incorporated: using team goals rather than individual competition, and relying more on direct teaching methods that let the students interpret the significance of the knowledge.

The learning seemed to benefit from the blend of autonomy and coaching in the social media content providers team. The teams were loosely organized as determined by the students. In addition, the students could rely on two faculty members - one professor and one technician - for assistance, but at the same time were free to make their own editorial judgements and help each other develop converged media skills. Even on the technical side, the environment allowed students to learn in their way - to watch someone else (visual), or to listen toinstructions (audio), or to try it out, and then determine what went wrong or right (kinetic).

The evaluation of their work was not the traditional grade from a teacher. Evaluation was peer-reviewed, as other students had to determine which videos were good enough to post. Evaluation also came from the "hits" on the Internet or "retweets" on Twitter that indicated they were popular media items. These were positive feedback for the whole team, therefore satisfying the collective nature of Arab learners' style.

However, the "group success" (described by Al-Issa as a goal for the students) was not only for their student colleagues, but also included the RTA. The focus groups showed students were eager to produce content that made the RTA look professional to the global audience. The leaders of the RTA were also Arab and were committed to helping the students succeed. This extended the concept of group success to include the organization they were working for, as well as their team.

One point realized from this study is the requirement for a project to program the students for success. Programing for failure comes when participants are given substandard equipment or cannot access newsmakers to interview. Poor technical quality and poor content lead to students' seeing themselves as "only students" instead of semi-professionals. Comments from students and professor indicated the partnership with university and external organizations was a positive learning environment for Arab students.

Conclusion

This study explores a model of using traditionally recognized education methodology to teach new media professional skills to female Arab university students. It acknowledges that some venerable education theories such as scaffolding can help mold learning projects that catapult the students into the most current communications practices. However, this study concludes that the model worked well because it also incorporated Al-Issa's characteristics of successful Arab teaching methods - non-competitive, group oriented goals, and clearly linked classroom learning to practical application.

This study found that Arab female students responded well to a learning environment that gave them some autonomy. Autonomy, however, needs to be managed by the faculty in a way that ensures a high probability of success. Faculty can help ensure success by incorporating quality equipment, appropriate facilities, and available coaching as needed.

After the six projects, Zayed University's College of Communication and Media Sciences has a large group of students who are experts in social media content production - in Arabic and English. They have shifted from recreational use of digital information to professional use. They previously knew how to produce converged content to share with friends on YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, and traditional print documents. However, now they can produce content of much higher standard with a focused goal in a professional time frame. They have become a commercially valuable content production team able to access the new media audience on behalf of their future employers.

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