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RESEARCH ONLINE

Teaching journalism students and regional reporters how to work with cultural diversity

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This paper examines the effectiveness of a set of curriculum materials developed for a Reporting Diversity and Integration Project tailored for Australian journalists and journalism students. The materials take a problem-based learning (PBL) approach to a hypothetical case study that involves Muslim netballers being banned from competition because they want to wear headscarves during play. Deferring to ideas developed by Russian psychologist, Leo Vygotsky, we proposed a few 'scaffolding' strategies to support student learning. The material was trialed with 30 first-year Deakin University journalism students and 30 regional journalists. The responses showed that both groups felt the materials we added to the curriculum resources, which provided information on Muslim women and the headscarf, affected how they would write the story. They also thought it was important to provide this kind of information for readers. This paper argues that providing cultural information in an accessible format for students and journalists in newsrooms should be integral to education and training materials designed to improve media coverage of cultural diversity issues.

Introduction

Presenting people, regardless of race, class or culture, as accurately as possible should be every journalist's aim. To do that, a journalist has to be knowledgeable about those he or she is covering" (Perry, 2006).

Australia has one of the highest percentages in the developed world of residents born overseas or whose parent(s) were born overseas. Maintaining harmony in this culturally diverse community is of great national importance. It requires journalism students, journalists and the general public to acknowledge and understand the cultural beliefs and practices of all ethnic communities in the country. The Australian media's handling of this diversity and culturally sensitive issues, however, has fallen short of this goal at times. In particular, the news media has been criticised for its reporting of events and issues involving Australian Muslims after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre and subsequent bombings in Bali and London. As the Islamic Women's Welfare Council notes:

> "[While] it is clear some media outlets and journalists have portrayed Muslims accurately and sensitively … the great majority of Muslims feel that the representations of Australian Muslims has been problematic" (Islamic Women's Welfare Council, p. 50).

To develop strategies for improving media coverage of cultural diversity, a 'Journalism in Multicultural Australia Project' was launched in 2005 with funding from the federal Department of Immigration and Citizenship. This was followed in 2007 with further funding for the 'Reporting Diversity and Integration (RDI) Project' – a partnership of universities and media organisations to educate and raise media awareness of the challenges of reporting multicultural affairs.

As part of the project, curriculum modules for use in tertiary journalism education and media training were developed by Lynette Sheridan Burns from the University of Western Sydney. The materials focused on the complexities and 'deeper questions' of reporting on cultural diversity so that students and early career journalists would have 'the tools they need to respond accurately and ethically when reporting multicultural issues' (Burns, 2007, p.21). Burns devised four case studies as part of the curriculum materials *(see www.reportingdiversity.org.au)*.

This paper examines the effectiveness of case study one – which is, the potential discrimination against Muslim netballers. We chose to trial this material because it dealt with practical news writing skills while developing students' problem-solving abilities. Primarily, we believed this material would interest students because it had the most 'sensational' news angle and would challenge their ability to report with responsibility.

The materials developed by Burns take a problem-based learning (PBL) approach to a case study of Muslim netballers being banned from competition. The scenario raises issues about how journalists can perpetuate cultural stereotypes and its potential consequences. The learning resources include an overview of the issues and events involved in the scenario, interview transcripts, discussion points and questions, and a suggestion that educators can provide students with '10 questions to guide journalists through the decision-making process' (Black, Steel and Barney 1997, p.72)

We trialed the materials with 32 first-year Deakin University students and 30 regional journalists in non-daily Australian newspapers. The journalists were also students undertaking the Country Press Australia/MEAA post-cadet journalism course facilitated by Deakin University.

We argue that educational materials developed for the Reporting Diversity Project can be enriched by adapting the 'scaffolding' strategies of learning developed by Russian psychologist, Leo Vygotsky. 'Scaffolding' essentially involves providing students with appropriate learning tools matched with their learning needs to help them master a given task.

Our study examines the following research questions:

1. Does providing additional, detailed cultural information and guidance (scaffolding) enhance student learning about issues of diversity?
2. Do journalists and university students think they need to be educated on issues of diversity?
3. Are there any significant differences between practising journalists and university students in their approach to reporting issues of diversity?

Problem-based learning

Problem-based learning (PBL) encourages students to learn through structured exploration of a research problem (Mills, 2006). A simple definition may be that the problem comes first and students are encouraged to define and gather information to explore it. Burns (1997) argues that PBL places journalism students in the active role of problem solvers (practitioners) and confronts them with a situation that reflects the real world.

One criticism of PBL is that students, as novices, cannot be expected to know what might be important for them to learn, especially in subject area which they have no experience (Gallow, 2008). It is argued that PBL alone will not produce the most effective outcome for the Reporting Diversity project. It cannot be expected that journalism students bring a detailed understanding of the Muslim faith into the classroom. The existing PBL approach to the materials encourages students to seek out high-quality information on the Muslim faith independently. Determining what 'quality' information should be used is knowledge which needs to be facilitated by journalism educators. Time restraints are also a consideration in university tutorials of one or two hours. Working journalists faced with the same PBL scenario are time poor and it cannot be assumed they will make the same research effort. Davis indicates that increasingly journalists feel compelled to react to what is readily made available to them, rather than seeking and researching stories, which takes time and valuable editorial resources (2003, pp.27-32).

The Vygotskian approach to education

In a Vygotskian framework, 'learning activities may be characterised as guided investigations' (Hedegaard, 1990, p.358). Learning takes place in the 'zone of proximal

development', which is defined as 'the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers' (Diaz et al, 1990, p.159). Therefore, activities and information that aim to educate students must account for their level of experience or prior knowledge in order to be effective. This is best achieved by introducing scaffolding techniques to assist learning. The term 'scaffolding' has been given to the mediation, or assistance, that takes place in the zone of proximal development (Hogan & Pressley, 1997, p. 9). Jerome Bruner is credited with coining the term 'scaffolding', which refers to teacher control and support being gradually withdrawn as students gain increasing mastery of a given task (Diaz et al, 1990). Through scaffolding techniques, an ethical and professional approach to the Muslim netballers scenario could be modelled. This promotes discussion and reflection on how having good cultural information changes the way the story is told.

Scaffolding tools for educating journalists on diversity issues

Vygotsky argues that guidance in learning takes place largely through dialogue between the teacher and student, and also between students, but it is also provided through what he termed as 'tools' and 'symbols' (Tryphon & Voneche, 1996; Moll, 1990; Wink & Putney, 2002).

In Vygotsky's view, language is the most powerful tool of all because word meaning fundamentally determines perception (Van der Veer, 1996) and language acquisition opens the way to conceptual thinking (Daniels, 2001). He recognised that for a student to become part of a knowledge community they must understand and be able to use the language of the discipline. This is important to our paper because it underlines the need to educate journalists on language and terminologies applicable to the people and the cultures they report on to help transform newsroom practices and public attitudes. Following this framework, we introduce four additional scaffolding tools to the discussion outlined in the curriculum materials. They include:

Cultural information

Journalism students and educators involved in reporting cultural diversity programs recognise the importance of learning to include relevant cultural information as routine journalistic practice and expressed a need for relevant cultural information in an easy to use format to assist students.

Ian Richards (1993, p.85) notes that one of the feedback points from students at the University of South Australia undertaking a course in journalism and multiculturalism was the need for 'a handbook on cultural sensitivities'.

After the first year of the Diversity Reporting Program at the University of Washington School of Communication, instructors noted a key recommendation, which was to '…always mention background, history, and causes in relation to diversity themes. All issues have their history, and in order for the reading audience to become

well informed and have a contextual framework for the story, these histories need to be retold, even if only briefly' (Valenzuela, 1990, p. 48).

For the purpose of this project, we used information from the *Media Guide: Islam and Muslims in Australia,* a project sponsored by the Australian government's Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs, the Islamic Women's Welfare Council of Victoria and the Living in Harmony Project. *(http://home.vicnet.net.au/~iwwcv/IWWC_media_guide.pdf).* The guide is an attempt to facilitate a working relationship between media and Muslim communities by providing information about Islam and Muslim communities to encourage accurate reporting of minority issues. Section 3.24 of this guide, 'Reporting on Modesty and Segregation', was used as a scaffolding tool in the case study to provide students with high-quality cultural material that could help them understand and contextualise the Muslim netballers' position on appropriate attire.

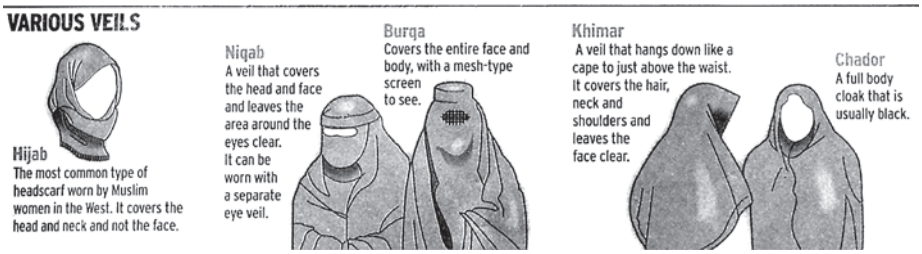
Graphics

Newspaper journalists work with graphic artists to package information to make it easy and attractive for readers, and sometimes these graphics have life and value beyond their publication date. Senior Fairfax journalist Debra Cleveland, who has produced hundreds of important graphics for *The Australian Financial Review,* describes those of high value to readers as 'cut out and keeps'.

Journalists have always relied heavily on their own material for the purposes of research, which they are able to access through news organisations' libraries, intranets, stylebooks, newspaper files and other resources, including reference materials compiled for use by sub-editors that is generally kept in a folder on the sub's desk.

Journalists sometimes 'cut out and keep' a graphic that will be a useful tool. When the report, *'It's a sign of the times: What we wear can trigger an unholy row'* by Harriet Alexander and Rochelle Mutton (SMH, October 17 2006 p. 3) appeared, the production editor at *The Herald* cut out and kept the accompanying graphic (see graphic 1 below) in the reference area on the subs' desk.

Graphic 1



The graphic shows and names the different types of headscarves worn by Muslim women. Sub-editors on the paper continue to refer to it for checking that headscarves are correctly identified and spelt. The researchers decided this was also a highly appropriate tool to provide for journalism students as part of the curriculum materials as it was created by a newsroom and self-selected by journalists as a useful tool for reference. It can be used as a tool to scaffold student learning by providing

a visual aid and correct terminology when reporting on issues involving Muslim women's dress.

Practical news writing

In order to successfully scaffold student learning, we needed to measure the students' current level of development so as not to assume more or less knowledge or skill than the students possessed at the outset. Asking students to write introductions to the story about the Muslim netballers gave us a chance to assess their approaches to the material and use this information as a starting point for scaffolding discussion on professional approaches to reporting the issue, including the need to provide cultural context and questioning conflict as the dominant news value. We emphasise that reporting this issue responsibly involves including other voices and cultural information.

The 10-point plan to reporting culture and difference

Burns points students towards a recommended guide to ethical reporting by Black, Steele and Barney (1997). This is a broad ethical framework that is generally helpful but not specifically designed to guide journalists' thinking on questions of culture and difference. We made some adaptations to it for use in the curriculum material trials at Deakin University. Questions were introduced and others re-framed to scaffold students' thinking on cultural diversity issues and the guide was recast in language designed to appeal to journalists.

Methodology

This study trialed the materials developed as part of the Federal Government's Journalism in Multicultural Australia Project. A stratified, purposive sample of 30 regional journalists working for non-daily Australian newspapers was selected for the study. These journalists work on non-daily newspapers with a readership of less than 10,000 and have between one and three years' reporting experience. Thirteen of the journalists were participants in a conference for regional journalists and the other 17 were selected randomly from a population of 60 CPA post-cadet students. The journalists were invited to participate in the research and complete a subsequent questionnaire. All 30 journalists agreed to participate and were emailed copies of a plain language statement before completing the material. Their participation in the research was entirely voluntary. Anonymity was also guaranteed.

A purposive sample of 30 Deakin University journalism undergraduates was also selected for the study. They were on-campus students at the university's regional Victorian campuses at Geelong and Warrnambool. The case study was built into the course curriculum of the unit ALJ111 – Contemporary Journalism in Semester 1. The students were given the option of participating in the research during a one-hour tutorial or completing an alternative exercise. They were given a plain language statement at the start of the tutorial and all agreed to participate.

The curriculum material

The material issued to participants was divided into two sections. Respondents were asked to complete section one before being presented with section two.

Section One:

Secton one of the material included details of a case study listed below.

One of your friends alerts you to an uproar in the local netball competition. She tells you that the State Netball Association has banned Muslim girls from wearing headscarves when they play, effectively forcing them out of the competition. You call the president of the SNA, Ms Ball, who confirms the ban. You also speak to the local member of Parliament who says the real issue is protecting the freedom of Australian-born Muslim girls to be like all other Australians. You also speak to the mother of one of the girls affected by the ban. A transcript of these interviews is listed below.

INTERVIEW 1: Ms Sharon Ball (President, State Netball Association)

REPORTER: Is it true that girls from the City West Netball Club have been banned from the State competition for wearing Muslim headscarves?

MS BALL: They have not been banned from the competition. They have been banned from wearing the scarves with their uniforms. I am not racist - it is a question of dress code.

REPORTER: But they have to wear them, so they can't play…

MS BALL: It's their decision. It is a question of equity – one rule for all. I don't see why these girls should be forced to cover up – there is nothing indecent about a netball uniform. It is offensive to suggest there is. Girls playing in track pants and long sleeves under their uniform look ridiculous, let alone when they are wearing scarves as well.

INTERVIEW 2: Mr Darrin Lee (Local member)

REPORTER: Mr Lee, I understand you are concerned about the criticism levelled at State Netball for banning headscarves for Muslim players. Why have you entered this debate?

MR LEE: I believe these girls need protection from fundamentalist parents who stop them assimilating into Australian society. Decent Muslims should be taught to respect women, not make them hide themselves. We all know Muslim youth have problems in coming to terms with their identity - especially when there is conflict between value systems at school and at home.

REPORTER: Why aren't religious reasons an acceptable justification?

MR LEE: Allowing Muslims to wear the scarf while playing sport upsets national integration of the Muslims in particular. The scarf issue could be considered an issue that could bring more division and that allow it to be worn by one netball team would upset people of other faith. It is an issue of social integration.

REPORTER: But the girls have said they would feel too uncomfortable without their scarves…

MR LEE: The underlying rationale for the scarf is that women should cover their crowning glory so as not to provoke feelings of "lust" in men. In Australian society we have progressed to the view that it is men's responsibility to control their sexual urges whatever women are wearing.

INTERVIEW 3: Mona Samander (Mother)

REPORTER: Mrs Samander, why should your daughter and her team mates be allowed a different dress code to other players?

MRS S: Schools must "reasonably accommodate" their students' religious practices, for example by letting them wear hijabs or Jewish skullcaps, so I don't see why sporting groups are any different. Not-for-profit private sports associations aren't exempt from the legal notion of "reasonable accommodation" of religious practices.

REPORTER: Why is this issue so important to you?

MRS S: To ban headscarves is an extreme measure that only adds to the feelings of alienation and victimisation in sections of the Muslim community. We want our girls to be able to play sport and lead a healthy life. Why is modesty so offensive to some people?

Questions for you to complete

1: **Write the introduction to this story based on the above material in the space below.**

2: **Now read through the supplied material on Muslim dress (part 2) and complete the questionnaire.**

Section Two:

Students were asked to read information on Muslim women, modesty, segregation and the *hijab (http://home.vicnet.net.au/~iwwcv/IWWC_media_guide.pdf)* and also view the 'cut out and keep' graphic on Muslim dress (see Graphic 1).

Students were then asked to complete a questionnaire prepared according to the guidelines provided in Wimmer and Dominick (2006). The survey consisted of a range of open-ended and closed-ended questions such as:

- Would you change the way you wrote the introduction to the story after reading through the material in part 2 yes/no;
- What changes would you make?
- Do you think you should provide information in your story about why women wear the hijab/headscarf? Yes/No
- Who else could have been interviewed for this story?
- What secondary sources or background material could have been used?
- Do you think this story should be published? Yes/No
- List your reasons why/why not

- Do you think journalists need to be educated about issues of diversity such as the case study outlined above? Yes/No.

The students' responses to these questions provided the researchers with opportunities to identify where students needed more guidance and support and to scaffold their learning further through discussion.

Results

The introductions to the story about Muslim netballers were first analysed to determine the news angle taken by the participants before they were presented with further educational material and the subsequent survey. The majority of introductions were written in standard news style. All 62 respondents identified the news value by highlighting the conflict between Muslim netballers and the State Netball Association. However, there were some standout examples of students who exhibited attitudes towards Muslim netball players that were of concern:

Two practising journalists offered the following intros:

> Local member Darrin Lee has launched a stunning attack on the Muslim community claiming that fundamentalist parents are hindering their children's assimilation into the community.

And this:

> City West Netball Club has been split by a decision to ban Muslim players from wearing headscarves. Those who have imposed the ban say it will help integrate young Muslim women into Australian society.

These introductions were from undergraduate students:

> The State Netball Association has banned Muslim girls wearing their traditional headscarves in an attempt to scrap social alienation among the Muslim community.

> The State Netball Association has banned Muslim girls from wearing headscarves while participating in the sport, believing they're protecting the freedom of Muslim girls to be like other Australians.

> Sharon Ball, President of the State Netball Association, has banned Muslim girls from wearing headscarves whilst playing netball stating that girls who wear clothing underneath their uniform 'look ridiculous, let alone when they are wearing the scarves as well'.

Two news introductions written by respondents indicated that the Muslim girls were being forced to make a choice between their religion and their sport. For example:

> Local netballers of the Islamic faith are being forced to choose between respecting their modesty and active participation in Australian sporting lifestyle.

The data provided by the participants from the survey was analysed and grouped in qualitative and quantitative categories. The following closed-ended survey responses were examined to provide quantitative analysis:

- Do you think you should provide information in your story about why women wear the hijab/headscarf? (Yes/No)
- Do you think this story should be published? (Yes/No)
- Would you change the way you wrote the story after reading the material? (Yes/No); and
- Do you think journalists need to be educated about reporting on issues of diversity? (Yes/No).

See Table 1 below:

Survey theme	Working journalists' response. Total responses 30		University journalism students' response. Total responses 32	
	Yes	No	Yes	No
Would you change the way you wrote the introduction to the story after reading the educational material?	6	24	7	25
Responses in %	**20%**	**80%**	**21.8%**	**78.1%**
Do you think you should provide information in your story about why women wear the hijab/ head scarf?	30	0	31	1
Responses in %	**100%**	**0%**	**96.8%**	**0.03%**
Do you think this story should be published?	30	0	27	5
Responses in%	**100%**	**0%**	**84.3%**	**15.6%**
Do you think journalists need to be educated about reporting on issues of diversity?	30	0	32	0
Responses in %	**100%**	**0%**	**100%**	**0%**

As indicated in Table 1, 100 percent of working journalists said they thought information should be provided in their news article about why women wear the hijab compared with 96.8 per cent of university students. One undergraduate student who did not believe this material was necessary did not provide a reason why.

All respondents agreed that journalists needed to be educated about reporting on issues of diversity. All the working journalists indicated the story should be published, while this position was supported by 84 per cent of university students.

Those university students who felt that the story should not be published offered the following explanations:

> "It's been a topic covered by the media for many years ad nauseam. Moreover, its impact (is) arguably not that significant on society."

And this from another student:

> "This is an ongoing issue that fuels community division."

Two students said they believed the story was "not interesting" and hence should not be published.

Eighty per cent of the working journalists said they would not change the way they wrote the introduction to the story after reading the educational material, compared with 78 per cent of university students.

The responses from those who indicated they would make changes to their introductions were examined to provide a qualitative descriptive analysis of the themes of data collected. Overall, 13 respondents said they would change their introductions after reading through the material. The types of changes students would make included using more appropriate language or providing more cultural information. For example, one university student offered the following:

> "Would provide more information about traditional headscarves for readers who don't know very much about the issue."

And this from a practising journalist:

> I would call the scarf a hijab. I would make the tone of the introduction more serious and write how the girls would have to go against their religious beliefs in order to play netball."

Others said they would leave the MP out of the intro. A working journalist said:

> "I would move Mr Lee's comments further down the story and instead get some more information on why the association has banned headscarves. Comments from the local Muslim community or even migrant community would come before his. After reading the background information his views are fairly inaccurate and I would expect would be quite offensive and I think using them in (the third paragraph) gives them credibility to the readers which is really misinforming them.

Two university students said they would ensure their introduction was more balanced by providing the opinions of all parties involved in the issue.

The survey responses to the questions "What secondary sources or background material could have been used" and "Who else could have been interviewed for this story" were examined to provide a quantitative analysis of the themes of data collected (see Table 2 next page).

Table 2: Alternative sources and interview subjects

Other sources which may have been used in researching article	Journalists	Uni students	Total
Background information on the hijab/ Muslim faith	24	17	41
Background on netball dress code	4	0	4
Netball code of conduct	1	2	3
Legal position/discrimination policies	3	1	4
Forum on Australia's Islamic Relations (FAIR)	1	0	1
Media releases/statistics/internet	0	5	5
Other interview subjects who may have been contacted for the article			
Muslim netball players	17	25	42
Opposition netball players	11	11	22
Muslim community/religious leader	15	7	22
State Immigration Department	1		1
Academic	1		1
Safety expert (is hijab safe while playing sport)	1	1	2
Other netball association leaders	0	1	1
Islamic Women's Welfare Council of Victoria	0	1	1
Extremist	0	1	1

Table 2 shows that a total of 41 respondents felt that background information on the hijab/Muslim faith was the important secondary source, while 42 respondents highlighted Muslim netball players as important interview subjects for the story. Other interview subjects identified included opposition netball players and Muslim/community leaders. The data also indicated that working journalists were less likely to seek comment from the Muslim players but almost twice as likely to give a community or religious leader the opportunity to comment than the undergraduates.

Five of the undergraduates said they would use press releases, statistics and the internet as sources of information but no working journalist identified these as potential sources of information, even though they indicated strongly that background cultural information should be included.

Discussion and conclusion

The study shows all the journalists and journalism students surveyed believe they need to be educated on issues of diversity. The research also indicates that introducing 'scaffolding' strategies such as the use of graphics and background material on cultural diversity can assist students to think through the issues involved in reporting issues of cultural diversity as well as understand the need for specific cultural information, including appropriate language.

Asking students to write the introduction to the story in the first instance helped them to identify with the issue of cultural diversity from a professional and practical

perspective. The introductions showed that all journalists and journalism students identified the news value of the story by high-lighting the conflict between Muslim netballers and the State Netball Association, but it also revealed several examples of students who exhibited attitudes towards Muslim netball players that were of concern.

While 80 per cent of working journalists and 78 per cent of university students said they would not change the way they wrote the introduction to the story after reading the material designed to scaffold their learning, all participants indicated it was important to provide detailed cultural background information about the hijab and the Muslim faith for the readership.

Undergraduate students in particular thought it was important to give the young women who are the subject of the story, a voice. Twenty-five undergraduates suggested Muslim netballers should be contacted for comment, compared with 17 CPA students. Empowered with cultural information and language, these journalists in training are in a position to not only represent Muslims accurately and sensitively, but to enhance community harmony by educating the community and introducing Islamic terms to everyday conversation.

The results also showed that the majority of students used their news values and objectivity when writing the introduction to the story about the Muslim netballers. Some participants presented the issue as the Muslim girls having to choose between sport and their religious beliefs. This showed an underlying cultural assumption by the writers and offered an opportunity for the tutor to guide students in a discussion about what cultural assumptions are and how they can unwittingly cause journalists to perpetuate stereotypes and feed negative attitudes about people from other cultures.

The survey results indicated no working journalists would use press releases, statistics or the internet as a source of information, but five undergraduate students indicated these were potential sources. This reinforces Davis's (2003) notion of overstretched journalists being unable or unwilling to undertake in-depth research. It further highlights the need for cultural information that has been designed specifically to be highly accessible in newsrooms.

Limitation of the study

This research did not attempt to measure the benefits of some discussion points outlined in the curriculum material because the study focused on the need to provide other forms of 'scaffolding' before discussion occurs. The discussion points not included in this research were:

- Can the ethical values in this story be balanced with journalistic and commercial values?
- Have you ***assumed*** anything?
- What headline would you write for this story?

Further research is required to create a specially designed guide to help journalists' thinking on questions of culture and difference. We intend to pursue this work as the focus of a separate study.

A study to help tailor curriculum materials for those journalists involved in the CPA post-cadet course is also required. We do not believe the current materials are designed for distance education and there is an opportunity for imaginative and interactive technology-supported teaching strategies to help develop students' understanding of skills and dealing with matters of culture and difference.

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