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Student journalists learn about Aboriginal communities and culture in Western Australia



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Non-Aboriginal journalists seldom get to meet and talk with Aboriginal people about their life and beliefs, and this often results in narrow and misinformed reporting. This paper reports on a new initiative between the Combined Universities Centre for Rural Health (CUCRH) and the journalism program at Edith Cowan University (ECU) in Perth, Western Australia to help journalism students achieve a better understanding of Aboriginal communities and culture, and, consequently, a more informed approach to their reporting of Aboriginal issues. In July 2008, eight final-year ECU journalism students spent a month with Aboriginal communities in two Western Australian towns. The placement was offered again in July 2010.

Introduction

Indigenous issues are not generally considered by editors and journalists to be newsworthy because they do not appeal to the majority of readers. This, despite the significant role of the media “in framing the ways in which we think about issues” and “imaging Indigenous people and their affairs for most non-Indigenous people” (Meadows, 2005, p.39). Few non-Aboriginal journalists have met, let alone talked or discussed with Aboriginal people about their life, culture and concerns. The result is that news stories are often inaccurate and portray a distorted and stereotypical view of Aboriginal communities as places of constant disorder and drunkenness. This raises a key question for journalism educators: how to train student journalists to report more accurately and fairly on Aboriginal issues, especially in Western Australia which has one of the largest Aboriginal populations in Australia.

One of the effective training methods is to visit Aboriginal communities and discuss directly with them about their hopes, fears and problems, said Ross James, a former member of the Combined Universities Centre for Rural Health (CUCRH) team in Port Hedland. Speaking at a guest lecture on *‘Reporting Aboriginal health’* to journalism students at Edith Cowan University’s Mount Lawley campus in Perth in 2006, he invited students to visit some communities in and around Port Hedland. That, he noted, would be an important first-step in a long process of engaging with the Aboriginal community. One student took up the challenge in 2006 and two in 2007. All three students remarked in email correspondence how beneficial the experience had been because they had direct access to Aboriginal people and that, they said, had changed their attitudes towards Aboriginal issues.

In July 2008, eight ECU journalism students were placed for one-month with Aboriginal communities in two Western Australian towns. This was a significant departure from the usual ECU journalism placement unit (CMM3104), where students apply for a one-month internship in a Perth-based newsroom where they seldom leave the confines of the city news environment. CUCRH’s invitation presented a new approach – a direct engagement with Aboriginal people to acquire a better understanding of Aboriginal affairs.

This paper reports on the process and outcomes of the placement program. First, it reviews recent studies on the reporting of Aboriginal issues in the Australian media, and then applies the theory of Situated Learning to provide a theoretical framework and pedagogical rationale for the placement. Second, the methods and the placement are explained in the context of the students’ feedback on their learning experience.

Background information: Reporting on Aboriginal issues

Hartley and McKee (2000) argue in *The Indigenous Public Sphere* that “compared with the proportion of Aboriginal and Islander people in the Australian population in the 1990s, Indigenous stories were massively over-represented in the media” (Hartley and McKee, 2000, p. 49). Their argument hinges on the fact that Indigenous Australians have a “right to be ordinary” and the media should seek to “report Aboriginality via its mundane rather than its ‘fatal’ aspects” (p.45). This argument provides a pedagogical rationale for placing students within Aboriginal communities where they

can experience the *ordinariness* of Indigenous people and the mundane aspects of Aboriginality rather than always encountering/representing Indigeneity as an “issue”.

Meadows, Hippocrates and Van Vuuren (1997) compared the coverage of Aboriginal communities by newspapers (*The Courier-Mail* and *The Cairns Post*) and television stories (ABC TV and National Nine News) between January 28 and February 3. The case study examined the news coverage of Indigenous protest meetings in Brisbane together with a broader sweep of all news stories that dealt with Indigenous affairs in that period (Meadows et al, p. 73). They found 28 print news stories but only nine quoted Indigenous sources directly, and 15 television news stories of which only three allowed an Indigenous person to speak on Indigenous issues.

In subsequent studies, Meadows (2001 & 2005) remains highly critical of media presentation of Aboriginal issues.

Although the trend in the past 20 years has been away from the overt racism of the colonial press, institutionalized racism is manifested in the systematic omission of Indigenous voices in the news media. Indigenous sources make up a fraction – between a fifth to one third – of all sources used by journalists in stories about Indigenous affairs. This situation had remained unchanged in Australian journalism for the past 20 years. (Meadows, 2005, p. 36)

Meadows ends pessimistically: “The picture which emerges from a long history of indifference towards Indigenous people is a continuing media misrepresentation of their identities and lifestyles” (p. 39). He states that many indigenous groups have responded by turning their backs on mainstream media and engaging in their own forms of cultural production – primarily radio, television and new media technology – thus creating their own Indigenous public spheres, as alluded to by Hartley and McKee (2000) where Aboriginal communities are developing their own notions of Indigeneity, which previously were “hardly been under the control of Indigenous people (p. 3).

Roberts (2007) explored the representation of Indigenous Australians in the *Herald Sun*, *The Age* and *The Australian* newspapers between April 1 and July 10. He focused on the reporting of Aboriginal health and the social determinants of health. This study found 505 articles featuring Indigenous Australians with only six per cent related to Indigenous health. The *Herald Sun* focused on Indigenous sport and art while *The Australian* emphasised on Indigenous politics and art. *The Age* focused on Indigenous sport and politics. Roberts concluded that Indigenous health was not a high priority for these newspapers.

Australian health writer, Melissa Sweet, conducted a series of interviews on the topic of media coverage of Aboriginal health in March 2009. Simon Holding, senior researcher in the School of Public Health at the University of Sydney, said the coverage tended to deal in stereotypes and unrelentingly negative language. “There are so few stories on Aboriginal health that they don’t rate as a major category.”

Former television journalist, Jeff McMullen was equally unimpressed with the media’s performance. “The truth is that the media is conveying a sense of hopelessness and despair that feeds the trauma, the general mental illness and the sense of powerlessness amongst the most disadvantaged people” (Sweet, 2009). McMullen thinks there are

real problems in the reporting of Aboriginal health because many journalists and news editors are ignorant of Indigenous history and culture.

Tamara Mackean, president of the Australian Indigenous Doctors Association (AIDA), describes the media's portrayal of Aboriginal people as perpetuating a discourse of "total negative deficit", and argues that Aboriginal people are hesitant to talk to the media because they see journalists portraying them as always fighting and lacking leadership. Mackean, offers a solution: "I would get small group of journalists together and get them to listen to the people, to hear Aboriginal peoples' concerns and how they are being portrayed (Sweet, 2009).

Theory of situated learning

Resnick (1987) pre-empted the notion of situated learning by proposing that 'bridging apprenticeships' be designed to link the theoretical learning in formal classroom instructions to real-life application of the knowledge in the work environment. The theory of situated learning (or situated cognition) was first described by Brown, Collins and Duguid (1989) and developed out of observing successful learning situations by the researchers. They wanted to find examples of effective learning in any context or culture, and analyse the key features of such models. They found six common critical factors in all the successful models: apprenticeship, collaboration, reflection, coaching, multiple practice and articulation.

The key point for Brown, Collins and Duguid (1989) is that meaningful learning will only take place if it is embedded in the social and physical context within which it will be used. Formal learning is often quite distinct from authentic activity, or 'the ordinary practices of the culture' (Brown et al, 1989, p. 34). Many of the activities undertaken by students are unrelated to those performed by practitioners. A means of achieving authenticity, they proposed, was the model of cognitive apprenticeships, a method designed to "enculturate" students into authentic practices through activities and social interaction based on the traditional apprenticeship model (Brown et al, 1989, p. 37). A critical aspect is the notion of the apprentice observing the 'community of practice'. Indeed, situated learning theory provides a pedagogical rationale for this journalism placement because of its focus on learning through observing Aboriginal communities/practices in their own environment and using this new knowledge to inform content.

Lave and Wenger (1991) proposed that participation in a culture of practice can initially be observation from the boundary or 'legitimate peripheral participation'. As learning and involvement in the culture increases, the participant moves from the role of observer to a fully functioning agent. Legitimate peripheral participation enables the learner to progressively piece together the culture of the group and what it means to be a member. "To be able to participate in a legitimately peripheral way entails that newcomers have broad access to arenas of mature practice" (p. 110). This was to an extent confirmed by feedback from the journalism students after their one-month placement. Their heightened awareness about Aboriginal culture gained from the placement complemented the conceptual and theoretical knowledge acquired in journalism lectures and tutorials. During the placement, the students were allowed to observe and experience the complexities of the life and problems that Aboriginal communities face in Western Australia. While the scope of the student placement

was too limited to fully test the theory of situated learning, it provides a basis for a longitudinal study of similar journalism placements.

There are some difficulties when one attempts to construct learning environments that employ the principles and elements described by proponents of situated learning theories. The literature reveals a number of case studies, and some research, that support the situated learning approach as a successful model of instruction and learning: Griffin (1995); Bransford, Sherwood, Hasselbring, Kinzer, and Williams, (1990); Bransford, Vye, Kinzer and Risko, (1990); Young, (1993). Critics of the theory, however, argue that situated learning requires learners to be exposed to 'masters' or experts in the practice of their trade and therefore it cannot be, by its very definition, transferred to the classroom (Tripp, 1993; Wineburg, 1989).

Nevertheless, closely linked to the theory of situated learning, is the 'theory of authentic learning' which has a strong focus on problem-based learning. This has been used by many vocation-oriented journalism programs. By definition, the term 'authentic learning' means learning that uses real-world problems and projects, and that allow students to explore and discuss these problems. This approach differs from the traditional 'lecture' where teachers impart knowledge, which the students often have to memorize.

Research design – case study

This paper uses a descriptive and exploratory case study to detail what ECU journalism students did and what they said they had learnt from their one-month stay with Aboriginal communities in two Western Australian towns. The qualitative data were gathered from written reports by the eight students. There was only one open-ended question – What did you learn from the placement? An assessment of whether the students had improved their writing on Aboriginal issues during the placement was not part of this study because the students had never written a news story or feature article on such topics before the placement. They, however, were encouraged to publish in local newspapers. The student feedback shows that most students succeeded in this.

The placements in Port Hedland and Geraldton in July 2008 were organised and financed by CUCRH, which is part of a national network of university departments of rural health funded by the Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing. CUCRH is managed by a consortium that includes Curtin University of Technology, Edith Cowan University and University of Western Australia. They financed the flights, accommodation and students' living allowance. At each location there was a CUCRH staff member who acted as a guide and mentor. The placements were broken into two parts: first, an induction into the history, culture and tradition of the Aboriginal people in the region where the students worked and a visit to several Aboriginal committees (accompanied by CUCRH staff). Second, a focus on the journalistic process where students researched, interviewed and wrote their articles.

Two journalism students were placed in Geraldton (450 km north of Perth) in July 2008. First, they completed an introductory workshop at the Geraldton Regional Aboriginal Medical Service (GRAMS). Then they attended Wajarri language classes at the Irra Wangga Language Centre. They ended their induction with a media

forum that included representatives from local media and Aboriginal organizations. In the second part of the placement, the students investigated issues specifically related to health in the local Aboriginal community and wrote articles for the local and Indigenous media outlets such as the *Geraldton Guardian*, the *Yamaji News* and *WA Today* on *The West Australian* website. The students covered various events surrounding NAIDOC week, which celebrates the history, culture and achievements of Aboriginal and Torres Strait people.

CUCRH hosted six students for a one-month placement in Port Hedland, 1600 kilometres north of Perth, and the largest town in the Pilbara region. First, the students participated in a cultural awareness workshop run by the Wangka Maya Language Centre and were mentored by a senior Thalanji Aboriginal woman. Accompanied visits were organized to Warralong, a remote Aboriginal community, and to Roebourne, Karratha and Onslow. Students met various Indigenous organizations and were invited to participate in activities organized by Indigenous organizations such as the NAIDOC ball. The students worked with a journalist from the *North West Telegraph* on a number of health related stories. The main project for the month was called 'The Health Heroes of the Pilbara'. Students were given a range of contacts and generated human interest stories with a health theme. They were encouraged to submit their articles to local and indigenous media outlets including the *North West Telegraph*, *The West Australian*, the *Yamaji News*, the *Pilbara News* and the *Koori Mail*. Two of the students attended a radio workshop, edited community service announcements and conducted a weekly radio program under the supervision of the station manager.

Feedback from the student

All the students submitted reports of what they had learnt from the journalism placement. Here is a small sample of their replies that describe what they thought they had learnt. The scope and depth of the students' experience appears in italicised texts.

Understanding the culture

- *Working alongside Aboriginal people and health workers at GRAMS was an especially profound experience for me.* I had the opportunity to listen to people talk of Indigenous health issues, and some of the unfortunate effects a lack of knowledge and access to medical care can have on the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal people. My learning was not restricted to health; I saw evidence of a strong, proud people who are encouraging their children to stand tall. I often felt emotional because I can sense what a breakdown in a strong culture like theirs can do. But more importantly, I witnessed the positivity and commitment of many community members to keeping their culture and community strong.
- *The time here has been valuable for life lessons as a whole. It has taught me not to stereotype a group of people.* For example, just because I am white does not mean that I am the same as every other white person. I also learnt the value of listening, and I mean really listening.
- *This placement taught me a lot about how Aboriginals use storytelling, and how they value narratives to learn and teach people.* I also learnt the value of respect.

- We received one day of cultural awareness training and *I was blown away by how much I didn't know about Aboriginal cultural and communication methods*, which are so different to the way we communicate with each other.
- I also felt that I was quickly *able to build a strong communication method with many of the Aboriginal people I interviewed which enabled me to write better*. I certainly didn't expect to have work published, let alone to be able to work so independently.
- After talking to many Aboriginal people in Port Hedland and surrounding areas, *I started to notice how inappropriate some of the sources used in articles for The West Australian and The Australian were*. After learning the importance of tribal boundaries and also the different issues faced by different communities, the sources were from areas that had no relation to the area in topic in the articles.
- Placement reinforced for me the important role the media has to play in covering Indigenous health issues and also in bridging the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.
- *This was the most valuable thing I have done in the whole time I have been at uni*. I learnt to be more confident, *culturally aware*, and discovered that I am much more resilient than I thought. The people I met were so welcoming and were some of the most amazing people I have ever met. It also enabled me to make valuable contacts and also enabled me to realise that I could work in an area like this.
- *I cannot put into words how informative and useful this experience was, assisting me in both my work and in my social interactions with the indigenous community*.
- The thing I liked most about this placement is that we were expected to work independently and actively go out and talk to different members of the community. I cannot describe how valuable this was. I have definitely learnt to step out of my comfort zone and going out to places that I felt uncomfortable have made me feel confident in being able to talk to anyone.
- I would suggest to other students who are serious about journalism: take the opportunity to go on placement and *get as much experience as possible before trying to find a job in the field*.
- I am incredibly grateful for this experience, both personally and professionally, and *I do not doubt it will assist me in my future life and career*.

Practical outcomes

- I went to Geraldton with the goal of writing at least ten stories and hopefully having half of those published. *I am proud to say I wrote twelve stories and had all of them published*. Two of my stories were published in the *Geraldton Guardian*, one of which was also picked up by *The West Australian* and published online. I had a further few published in the *Midwest Times* which is connected with the *Geraldton Guardian*. Then all the rest were published in the June, July and August issues of the indigenous newspaper, the *Yamaji News*.

- *In total six of my articles* were published which included a page two article about the proposed new federal Indigenous body and about an Indigenous health worker who received a NAIDOC award. Two of my articles appeared in *Yamaji News*.
- Some of the topics I wrote stories on were: breast screening for Aboriginal women, NAIDOC week activities, vaccines for Aboriginal people, the Indigenous Women's Cancer Support Group, postnatal depression, and the Strong Family Strong Culture Program.

Negative comments

While the majority of student comments stressed the placement provided a positive learning experience, there were some problems in adapting to a new physical and cultural environment. Here are some of the comments.

- There was no one to meet us when we arrived and the keys to the hostel were missing.
- The laid-back attitude was frustrating especially when we got very vague instructions.
- The internet at one location didn't work which made it difficult to complete our stories.
- The late cultural training meant we had plenty of chances to insult people before that time.
- It was annoying when some would turn up late for an interview or not show at all.

Findings

There were no great expectations about this project other than to expand the knowledge of Aboriginal culture and issues among third year journalism students so that, as future journalists, they might consider writing on Aboriginal issues, and that they would be armed with more knowledge than they had received in the classroom. A key finding from the sample of student reports was that the one-month journalism placement created greater awareness among the students about Aboriginal culture, about themselves and about their approach to writing articles on Aboriginal issues. The Aboriginal elders and people who gave their time to the students should be thanked for there was no gain for them in the short term.

It was difficult to assess whether there had been an improvement with the students' writing on Aboriginal issues because none of them had ever written a news story or feature article on such topics before the placement. The fact that they had many news stories published while in Geraldton and Port Hedland was a positive outcome. It is highly unlikely that this would have happened if the students had just relied on lecture and tutorial notes on reporting Aboriginal issues or if they had applied for a placement in a Perth newsroom. Two of the students now work as full-time reporters on the *Geraldton Guardian* and the *Pilbara News*.

Positive feedback from the ECU journalism students and the staff at GRAMS and CUCRH has resulted in the allocation of eight more journalism placements in Geraldton and Port Hedland in July 2010. This project is still at an early stage and can only really provide a description with limited feedback. The next case study on the 2010 placement will involve the use of a questionnaire that seeks more precise and detailed responses from students and staff, together with a wider range of views that include Aboriginal elders and health workers to determine the impact of the student placement and publications. If the placement continues beyond 2010, then it will be possible to construct a longitudinal study to evaluate how worthwhile and viable such a placement is for all the stakeholders.

Another aspect is that a placement like this allows the students to experience the *ordinariness* of Indigenous people, rather than always encountering/representing Indigeneity as an 'issue'. An appreciation of the mundane aspects to Aboriginality may be what is necessary for achieving fairness and accuracy in news reporting on Indigenous people. Also, it would help if journalism educators were more exposed to the 'ordinariness' of Indigeneity and Aboriginal communities in general. The lack of engagement and experience of Aboriginal communities among many journalism educators inevitably influences the content and effective teaching of reporting Aboriginal affairs.

The placement allowed the journalism students to join an existing program set up for nurses to work in remote Western Australia. But this placement with its emphasis on acquiring a broader knowledge from being "out in the field" could have wider implications and challenge to journalism course coordinators in other universities, especially the possibility of offering different kinds of journalism placements? Apart from working in Aboriginal communities, there are other placements that move beyond the traditional newsroom placement for journalism students. These might involve asking the students to work alongside other professionals such as social workers, doctors, teachers, local politicians as a way to better understand the complex environment and related problems. Other possibilities are assigning students to job centres, drug rehabilitation clinics or emergency wards. Such close-up experiences would benefit future health, social, police and political reporters, especially learning in an authentic environment and providing a real context to understand complex human issues. These are ideas to ponder rather than a call for a drastic overall of journalism placements in Australian universities. There is an ongoing debate about the type and value of journalism placements (Furlan, 2007 p. 127). This placement adds some data and another perspective to the debate.

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