Mapping the media: 'Learner-centred' orientation to graduate employability

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Mapping The Media: ‘Learner-Centred’ Orientation To Graduate Employability

This paper reports on the introduction of media mapping in media education programs in three Australian universities. ‘Media mapping’ aims to integrate students’ theoretical and ‘real world’ knowledge of the media. It involves investigating media organisations, analysing their operations, developing data base profiles and then organising and creating the final representation of the media environment. The purpose and particular applications of media maps are discussed with reference to debates about the role of new media in media education, developments in Australian higher education policy, trends in teaching and learning, and the institutional contexts of two media maps described here. The prospects for wider adoption of media mapping, and benefits for students, teachers and larger communities of interest, are also outlined.

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Media maps can be used to familiarise students with the media employment field and enable them to interact with prospective employers. They complement rather than supplement work placement/professional practice options in undergraduate programs by encouraging students to develop a panoramic view and to investigate the range and complexity of work undertaken in the field. Students can also use media maps to critically evaluate the assumptions that underpin their knowledge of media and communications industries, work environments and practices.

‘Media maps’ are not conventional cartographic products; they are exercises in relational thinking. In other words, media maps seek to develop the cognitive capacity to ‘map’, rather than simply adding new information about the locations of media organisations to conventional representations of the urban environment such as the street directory. In a trans-disciplinary review of maps and mapping behaviours, Stea and others (1996) argue that mapping is ‘a cultural universal’. Like language, the cognitive capacity to map appears to be ‘hard-wired’, although...
maps themselves are culturally specific.

The particular map produced by Media and Communication students in the Creative Industries Faculty at the Queensland University of Technology (QUT) takes the form of an online directory of media and related services in Brisbane (www.bmm.qut.edu.au). Students extend their knowledge of specific micro media environments by profiling individual firms for inclusion in the Brisbane Media Map (BMM). They consult a variety of sources, including the firms themselves. Working in teams, they coordinate these profiles into a general representation of the macro-media environment. A user-friendly database driven web site that can be customised by students and teaching staff provides the means by which this media map is published and made accessible to subsequent groups of students as well as wider user groups. The way that entries are taxonomically organised and represented in the BMM reflects the cognitive scheme of media and communication industries and value chains that students have developed and negotiated in their time as undergraduates. As a grounded expression of these mental maps, the BMM encourages students to develop a critical, applied awareness of their own learning processes as well as the various paradigms which have given structure to their understanding of media and communications industries, for example, as cultural industries, service industries and more recently as creative industries.

For journalism students in the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS), the media map exercise provides a welcome pretext to visit a newsroom and network with professional journalists. Each student profiles an individual news organisation and investigates an aspect of professional working life (eg. job requirements, a typical workday, or interactions with the public). Once the web shell becomes available later this year, the Sydney News Media Map (SNMM) will take the form of an online directory of Sydney-based news and current affairs organisations, that is, of the largest and most competitive journalism labour market in Australia. Profiling encourages students to reflect on the institutional framing of journalism, the characteristics that distinguish it from other information professions and the geography of information flows in Australia. Researching professional work enables students to critically analyse their own assumptions about news production, and to compare and contrast their own real world encounters with the research approaches and findings found in journalism studies. At present, the profiles and commentaries are stored in an online database that is available to students and teaching staff and used as a collective resource for classroom discussions and other assessment tasks. In addition, as we prepare to transform our data
into an organised map with a public interface, students have been considering different mapping strategies based on news priorities and technological platforms as well as institutional categories.

These two examples of mapping exercises suggest some of the ways that media maps encourage students to consider the social, material and geographic specificity of local media environments in ways that apply and extend their theoretical and experiential knowledge. In this process the values that underpin the ordering of knowledge of the macro environment also become available for critical evaluation: for example, students can explore the different categories and hierarchies of activity to which different media belong. Likewise, they can explore how to organise and represent these activities or, at a level of deeper analysis, question the basis on which judgements about definitions and representations are made. Media mapping concretely illustrates the observation made by Sean Cubitt in his assessment of digital aesthetics (1998: 54-55), that with new media it becomes possible for students to propose and implement new categories of knowledge and representation, as well as new orders of knowledge.

The rapid development of new digital media has opened up opportunities to innovate a maturing field of scholarly study and professional practice (Gauntlett 2000). New media have extended the range of objects, industries, literacies and cultural practices to be studied and learned. However, as networked computer-mediated communication has been incorporated into the resource base of universities, new possibilities have opened up to bridge the practice/studies divide in flexible and scalable ways. For example, the mapping exercises described in this article have been tailored to support context-specific learning outcomes in small and large classes. New media can also support experiments in a “design” orientation to curriculum (Kress 1997, discussed below). This is particularly the case for many of the ‘studies’ areas of Media and Communication where hands-on learning opportunities have previously been constrained by resource limitations.

Cubitt’s assessment of the pedagogical possibilities of new media, noted previously, resonates with Gunther Kress’ argument that the present period of rapid change demands a “design” orientation in media education (Kress 1997). This idea of design is not literal. Rather, it is concerned with shaping future-oriented social humans who can productively harness resources to address agendas of their own making, including those directed to the ideal outcomes associated with “communication in the electronic age” (Kress, 1997: 78). As Kress points out the, “social and political task
of the designer is fundamentally different to that of the critic” (Kress, 1997: 78), although others have since mounted a case for critical design (Wilson 2001). Media mapping engages with these propositions about ‘new’ media education. It focuses on employability while also inviting reflective engagement with history, habits, institutions, individuals, groups, money, knowledge and power as potential forces and resources for change.

In the Australian context, Media and Communication programs first developed in Colleges of Advanced Education and Institutes of Technology in the 1970s, before these institutions acquired university status during the Dawkins’ era reforms. In this respect these programs are institutionally connected to the rapid expansion of higher education in Australia and broader social critical discourses of the democratisation of information and knowledge. This provenance has also meant that Media and Communication programs have been more “vocational” than their counterpart liberal arts programs in traditional university settings (Wilson, 2001; Putnis et al. 2002). They have also been one of the fastest growing areas of the Humanities and Social Sciences. A recent Evaluation and Investigations study for the Department of Education, Science and Technology (DEST) found that enrolments in these programs have grown by 150 per cent in the last decade. Over 12,000 students were enrolled in Media and Communication courses offered by 30 out of 37 universities Australia-wide in 2002 (Putnis et al. 2002). These trends are attributed to a number of factors including perceived employer interest in the combination of professional and “soft” communication skills of Media and Communication graduates (Flew 2002: 178).

Strong demand is predicted to continue for those Media and Communication programs that focus on employability outcomes (Putnis et al. 2002). However, occupational categories and employment markets are rapidly changing as media also change. They are “fracturing” and evolving (Putnis et al. 2002: 18). As established media markets mature and employment opportunities contract, new ones are opening up. Preparing students for “horizon” careers and employers has been identified as a major challenge for Media and Communication curriculum development (Putnis et al. 2002: 18).

A related challenge concerns the capacity of universities to deliver employment outcomes to graduates. Universities have historically neglected this issue, focusing instead on the inputs of higher education, that is, on the resources and infrastructure that are necessary to educate students at a tertiary level. Consequently, the quality of information about outcomes from this investment,
including employment, is comparatively poor. Improved accountability to stakeholders (students, governments, employers) for outcomes in an internationalising market is one of the drivers of the current higher education reform agenda (DETYA 2001; DEST 2002). The current DEST approach to improving accountability strongly favours a narrow definition of outcomes based on general, measurable, performance-based indicators of employment and employability (DEST 2002). In other words, employability is seen as the key outcome in the current quality assurance debate. A compulsory, uniform, national Graduate Skills Assessment test, administered at entry and exit, appears to be the best instrument for achieving measurements of this kind (DEST 2002: 104-110).

Institutional responses to this debate have varied. Australian Technology Network (ATN) universities are now supporting a more ‘learner-centred’ approach based on a generic capabilities framework that, in time, will result in the development of individual profiles of learning attainment to complement awards at graduation (Bowden et al. 2002). Generic capabilities are the value-added qualities that universities seek to develop in their students during their period of undergraduate study. Importantly, in the ATN approach, qualities of critical understanding, leadership, and disciplinary knowledge are valued as generic capabilities of equal importance to employability.

Media mapping is an educational technology for curriculum renewal in the Media and Communication field that can support the ATN approach to graduate outcomes. It also articulates to higher education policy debates that place increased emphasis on the national strategic role of higher education in economic development. In both the QUT and UTS examples, students are encouraged to familiarise themselves with the media employment field and to develop a critical understanding of its characteristics and operations. Mapping exercises offer students multiple points of engagement with the field and, when supported by a learner-centred orientation to teaching and learning, multiple opportunities to navigate at their own pace those parts of the field of potential professional interest to them. In addition, through mapping exercises, students may well become aware of emergent rather than traditional heartland occupations.

The learner-centred approach to teaching and learning is a product of interdisciplinary scholarly activity at the intersection of education and psychology (Mayer 1998). It is also congruous with the client-centred orientation characteristic of the service and knowledge-based industries. The massification of higher education has brought increased variety in learner demographics...
and new challenges to the orthodox one-to-many transmission modes of delivery and teaching practices. The later are seen to maintain elite, time-bound notions of knowledge and standards that no longer have traction or serve students’ diverse interests (Bates 2000). The learner-centred approaches now being advocated in cognitive educational psychology are more flexible. They are not inconsistent with the proposition of a design orientation to media education and for this reason they offer useful insights for renovating teaching and learning in Media and Communication.

The claim made in this commentary is that the ‘learner-centred’ orientation of media mapping can enhance the development of discipline-specific and generic capabilities of Media and Communication students. One strategy, taken up in media mapping at QUT, has been to structure the learning environment so that students have access to an iterative and dialogical relation between academic knowledge and situated ‘real world’ experience. In other words, in that instance, the purpose of media mapping has been to help teachers create an “environment that enables students to embrace the twin poles of experiential and formal knowledge” (Laudrillard 2002: 23). The aim has been to move beyond a reliance on the mere transmission of theoretical knowledge so that students can develop understandings of the ways in which the tacit knowledge base of human action might be structured or re-structured in grounded exposition, authentic practice (Inglis et al. 1999: 39-40) and networks of social connection.

The broader significance of this ‘learner-centred’ orientation becomes apparent when considered at the program rather than subject level. The ATN generic capabilities framework mentioned above describes an ideal hierarchy of learning to be addressed on a whole-of-course basis through effective alignment of curriculum goals, teaching and learning practices, and assessment (Bowden et al. 2002, ‘Qualitative differences in the attainment of a generic capability’). This hierarchy of “scoping”, “enabling”, “training” and “relating” (encouraging problem-solving in new situations) has guided the re-positioning of the Media and Communication program at QUT that occurred in conjunction with the establishment of the Creative Industries Faculty in 2002. For instance, second year units generally aim to train students in the methods and theoretical frameworks of media and communication research and inquiry, while first year units aim to enable students to understand key disciplinary propositions and debates. In this way basic academic and technological literacies are scoped and students build a foundation for relational levels of engagement with both the field of Media and Communication and the real world which are supported in the upper level of the program.
Media mapping is presently used at QUT to support learning to a “relating” level of attainment in the capstone Media and Communication unit. It is part of a suite of complementary strategies that includes workplace-based training opportunities and related initiatives that aim to enhance the work-readiness of graduates. They also contribute to the profile-building potential of learning outcomes. Indeed, anecdotal feedback from past graduates suggests that participation in the BMM has also directly contributed to employment outcomes.

At the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS), the process of constructively aligning curriculum goals, teaching and learning practices and assessment is taking place more organically. In the Humanities and Social Sciences (HSS) faculty, subjects are being reviewed first to ensure we aim for realistic educational outcomes that build on our past experience. A whole-of-course review will then address questions of vertical integration and cumulative learning. *News and Current Affairs* is a compulsory second year subject for journalism students that is offered as an elective to second-year undergraduates across the faculty. Media mapping is used as a managed exploration of real world professional practice that connects to disciplinary knowledge of journalism and news media, and is technically supported by digital literacy skills. While journalism students have the additional benefit of specific professional skills training, a common first year disciplinary studies’ curriculum ensures the subject is accessible to all HSS students. The subject aims to increase both the job readiness of graduates and their disposition towards lifelong learning, the later based on practical knowledge of the continuities between education and employment experiences.

Media mapping has been incorporated into the curriculum at Southern Cross University (SCU) by Helen Wilson (http://hmcs.scu.edu.au/rainbow/). Although the basic concepts underpinning the SCU Rainbow Region Map and the BMM are very similar, there are also important variations between the maps. Even though it takes only a few hours by car to travel the distance between these institutions, the differences between the two settings are immediately apparent from the media maps. The SCU map also incorporates a ‘cultural map’ which serves as an online directory to different types of cultural organisations and activities in the Northern Rivers region of NSW. This development also demonstrates the adaptability of this teaching and learning approach. Indeed, mapping need not be limited to Media and Communication. Any field of social activity or knowledge can conceivably be similarly mapped.
Other institutions have also expressed interest in adopting the concept. The Universal Media Map (UMM) is currently being developed at QUT and tested at UTS with a view to investigating ways in which this resource might be extended to Media and Communications students and teachers in other tertiary settings. The UMM is a database and web shell that can be customised to suit local circumstances. Licence details for the UMM are still being worked out but it is expected that the UMM will be made available to non-profit educational institutions for use and development on an ‘open source’ basis. Adopters will have the option of using a consultancy service to support integration of the UMM into their curriculum. A key motivation here is to pursue a development path that also permits collaborative exploration of the potential of multiple distributed, linked media maps as a way of further enhancing students’ comparative, peer-to-peer knowledge-base of Media and Communication.

The effectiveness of media mapping in enhancing graduates’ generic capabilities, including employability, remains an open question that requires continuing research. Qualitative work with graduates would be one way to ascertain a connection between this particular educational experience and post-university life. We believe the need to open up learner-centred pathways in media education is still poorly understood, as is the potential structural tension between flexible, learner-centred curriculum and the vocational/professional orientation of Media and Communication programs generated by current policy trends. In our view, media mapping is an educational technology that both enables curriculum renewal and, through adoption of a design orientation, offers exciting opportunities for thinking through and acting on these problems.

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