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Principles For Further Education In Professional Communication

Continuing Education Or Postgraduate Degrees?

The popularity of communication courses with specific vocational outcomes — journalism, public relations and media production — suggests a maturing market for education in professional communication. There has, however, been comparatively less rapid growth in postgraduate education. This paper presents some preliminary findings about practitioners' attitudes to postgraduate education in journalism and public relations. Implications for university education, vocational specialisation and continuing professional development are discussed in light of current debates on professionalisation, the tertiary education sector and the nature of knowledge in our culture and society. Principles guiding new educational design in professional communication courses are proposed.

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This article describes the process of ongoing research into postgraduate curriculum development in the field of professional communication, specifically journalism and public relations. The purpose was to explore what journalists and public relations practitioners looked for when pursuing a higher degree. We focused on their preferred mode of offer, mode of delivery, content and assessment approaches. The expected outcome was a learner-centred curriculum. We employed two principles, iterative-experiential research and learner-centred course design. Our empirical research was completed between April 1996 and December 1997. Participants included journalists and public relations practitioners, postgraduate students enrolled in a coursework Master's degree, academics, industry educators and

training managers. Constructivism, and soft systems and co-evolution methodologies informed the research design. Methods used included a questionnaire, focus groups, two quasi-experimental learning situations and a survey.

The research was influenced by particular factors apparent in Australian tertiary education. This situation is briefly summarised to contextualise our empirical findings and subsequent discussion.

Journalism and public relations have developed in the teaching and research spheres, but are sometimes regarded as inappropriate within the tertiary education sector as their focus is often seen to be vocational and atheoretical. Throughout the development of journalism education there have been at least three unresolved questions which have informed this paper. The first is what should be the content of journalism education? Who should teach this content? What institution should be responsible for the education process?

In Australia the number of journalism courses 'exploded' in the 1970s in the former colleges of advanced education and again in the 1990s at universities (Patching 1996). In industry, attitudes of working journalists and their employers to tertiary education as a desirable preparation for careers in journalism ranged from dismissal to support (Henningham 1993). Australia now offers all variations of journalism education - in-house courses, private training programs, tertiary qualifications through public and private colleges or through public and private universities.

In public relations, the development of formal tertiary programs is most prominent in the United States, typically within schools of journalism. Their focus has been on media writing and public relations campaign outputs in terms of publicity material generated as opposed to either attitudinal or behavioural outcomes. This has led to a production-based, skills-oriented approach to public relations education dominated by a positivist paradigm (L'Etang and Pieczka 1997).

In the United Kingdom and Europe, public relations has grown up predominantly in schools of business as the tactical servant of the marketing management function. This is further entrenched by the vocational accreditation approach in the United Kingdom (where public relations falls under the marketing discipline) which implicitly values the mastering of skills and competencies rather than a broader and more eclectic university program such as a Bachelor of Arts or applied science degree.

Increasingly, North American and European academics are embracing critical and interpretative paradigms and are exploring

The Context

Postgraduate Education

different frames that can be used within public relations education and practice (eg Hon 1993; L'Etang and Pieczka 1997; Toth and Heath 1994). Australia has followed the international trends and the future practitioner of public relations has a choice of educational options ranging from technical and further education certificates to the university degree.

Journalism is a "relatively under-educated occupation - certainly in comparison with the traditional professions" (Henningham 1993:77). Henningham reports that 35% of journalists have a bachelor's degree while only 2% have higher degrees. In the United States 82% of journalists are graduates and 11% hold a higher degree (Weaver and Wilhoitt 1992). Many people who work in, or aspire to work in journalism and public relations, focus on the need to develop capabilities of importance to their chosen occupation and to progress these capabilities to an advanced and effective state. In an attempt to cater to this expressed need of potential students, Australian postgraduate offerings in journalism and public relations appear to have taken either a 'first qualification' or 're-skilling' approach.

The first qualification approach encourages professional communicators to attain a tertiary qualification. The people entering such courses are often newcomers to structured study and the process of tertiary learning and assessment. Their prior knowledge and practical experience gained while working is recognised by tertiary educators as a sound base. The goal is to extend and enhance this base by exploring the related abstract and theoretical foundations.

The re-skilling approach aims to add-on to, or extend, an undergraduate degree in a different discipline. Occasionally it involves extending a general communication studies undergraduate degree. This approach also results in a postgraduate qualification. It focuses on providing a learning environment to engage with information and practice directly related to the chosen professional communication field. The purpose is to encourage acquisition of occupation specific knowledge and skills that can be applied in practice. For both these approaches there is less emphasis on deeper understanding, research and knowledge creation inherent in postgraduate courses in more traditional disciplines.

In Australia during the 1980s and the early 1990s journalists, and those aspiring to be journalists, preferred informal means of acquiring knowledge, perhaps reflecting media industry doubts about tertiary education being a desirable preparation for careers in journalism (Henningham 1993; Shultz 1988). Recommendations

to improve journalism education (Medsker 1996) include the development of graduate programs focused on journalism and the expansion of journalism education's objectives to include professional development and continuing education for journalists.

To date, information on preferences for postgraduate education in public relations in Australia is lacking. In North America, Miller and Rose (1995) found the emphasis immediately following undergraduate qualification was on accreditation and continuing professional development and that interest in a postgraduate degree qualification decreased with increasing years of experience in the industry.

We would argue, in the context of the continuing education options for journalism and public relations, that practitioners need, not only advanced level skills such as those that come from knowledge and practice, but also a deeper understanding of a range of issues that comes from the study of facts, truths and principles. The implications of this are discussed later in the paper.

Taking the above context into account, we began looking at how to design a postgraduate program that could address the specialised information and skills needs of learners and provide qualifications without neglecting the academic development of the fields of journalism and public relations. Our suggestions are based on four factors: the move towards greater professionalism; issues evident in the tertiary education sector; the influence of discussions about knowledge in the information age and the learning society; and an empirical investigation of needs of journalists, public relations practitioners, adult learners and industry.

Despite some disdain for or dismissal of higher education, journalists and public relations practitioners are becoming more aware of professional attributes, behaviours and practices that are necessary for their career development and the role higher study of the field can play in their professions.

Amongst many academics, journalists and public relations practitioners there is an emerging understanding of the need to engage with the knowledge bases within professional fields as well as the mastery of a set of skills in the process of professionalisation. Henningham reports, all writers on professionalism argue the importance of a special form of knowledge, and generally maintain that the possession of specialised knowledge and related skills results from long training, typically at a university, where the tenets of a wide body of theory are mastered (1990:133).

Move Towards Greater Professional- alisation

The past twenty years have witnessed the emergence of different views about journalism as a profession. (Black 1982; Henningham 1990; Lloyd 1985; Mayer 1964). Discussions have delved into issues of entry standards, appropriate forms of education leading to more informed reportage, editorial independence, control of credible and reliable news products, service and stewardship, ethical behaviour, monitoring standards, and the role of professional associations. There appears to be no consensus on these matters in Australia. In North America, journalism is seen as a profession, whilst in the United Kingdom it is seen as a craft. What is similar throughout the world is the call to be more professional; we see this as a common process of professionalisation of the field.

Similarly there is an increasing movement to categorise public relations as a profession. Professionalisation debates in Australia and New Zealand revolve around issues of ethics, specialised knowledge, accountability and research (McKie 1997; Walker 1997; Zorn 1998). What is important about these discussions is that increasing professionalisation means bodies of knowledge are valued and those values permeate the areas of journalism and public relations. Specialised knowledge implies a different approach to problems and issues and this in turn alters educational priorities in developing journalists and public relations practitioners who embrace these values.

Issues In Tertiary Education Sector

Discussions on professional education influencing this study begin with the three educational passports (Ellyard 1990), traditional, vocational and enterprise, developed for the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. Traditional education is supported by vocational education with emphasis on multiskilling and career. This progresses to enterprise which focuses on the flexibility and creativity, where the person initiates, communicates and implements an idea in a cooperative manner. The enterprise factor is extended through learning associated with innovation. (Drucker 1993).

Gibbons (1994) points out that professional education now dominates the tertiary education sector and is no longer dominated by the arts and sciences. Core subjects have been overlaid by professional education on various levels: first, the liberal professions; then by technical professions; the caring professions; the enterprise professions. The next may well have the environmental sciences as its core. The intellectual effects of the shift from liberal education to professional training have been observed but their cumulative effect may only become decisive now in reshaping higher education (Gibbons et al 1994:77).

Opposition to the shift noted by Ellyard and Gibbons has also informed our work. The four scholarships of discovery, investigation, integration and transmission of knowledge (Boyer 1990) is supported by some institutions as a mission statement for higher education. Barnett (1994) notes that skills and vocationalism, competence and outcomes and capability and enterprise are the new vocabulary of higher education. He calls for the return of the lost vocabulary of understanding, critique, interdisciplinarity and wisdom. He proposes that this can be achieved by the combination of operational information and techniques, operational competence, intellectual processes and knowledge, academic competence and experience of people, lifeworld becoming.

Perhaps Duke (1997) represents the current trend in the dialogues. He believes we are experiencing the disappearance of the dichotomy between education and training with the coming together of head and hand, liberal and vocational, and knowledge and skills. This change may begin to explain the confusion surrounding the meaning of terms such as educate, train, teach, learn, information, skills and knowledge. We have witnessed this confusion in our study amongst students, journalists, public relations practitioners, industry managers and academics. Understanding and usage of the terms appears to be guided by what people are experiencing and their desires rather than the abstract definition.

Discussions concerning the changing mode of knowledge production (Gibbons et al 1994), and the changing nature of categorising knowledge such as disciplinary, multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary possibilities (Basarab 1998) provide further ideas to consider when developing a postgraduate program. Our study appears to reflect these discussions and the suggested principles in this paper take into account their existence.

Gibbons argues that there are two modes of knowledge production, which he terms Mode 1 and Mode 2.¹ He suggests that Mode 2 production is predisposed to the production of specialised knowledge and is emerging as a distinct and favoured set of cognitive and social practices.

Basarab (1998) believes that disciplinarity, multi-disciplinarity, inter-disciplinarity and trans-disciplinarity are like four arrows shot from a single bow: knowledge. He advocates an approach to meet the increased knowledge challenge. This approach involves the development of bridges between and through the different knowledge bases. He concludes that this can lead to knowledge beyond disciplines, a unity of knowledge,

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which can help to understand the present.

Around the world, the higher education sector, in its public, private and corporate forms, is also debating their approach to the knowledge economy and the associated ideas of the business of learning and leveraging knowledge for competitive advantage (Gettler 1998). In Australia the tertiary education sector exists in a situation of increasing demands for and from fee-paying students. This also impacts on the nature of tertiary and further education programs.

Referring to education in professional communication, Zorn (1998) suggests that educational discourses have been colonised by market discourses. He further suggests that this leads to the treatment of the university as a business and its degrees as consumable product. This trend towards what Zorn refers to as marketisation has also been noted by Fairclough (1995) as a disturbing feature of the tertiary education sector.

The requirements of an information society (Toffler 1995) provide yet another context for this study. Toffler argues that as the level of social and economic diversity increases the more information must be exchanged to maintain integration in the system. We don't consume information like other resources. It is generative (Toffler 1995:21, 22).

The higher education sector is being asked to respond to a changing global/local society (Naisbett 1994) by providing innovative learning opportunities suitable to a learning organisation (Senge 1990), a learning community as described by Hough and Paine (1997) and a lifelong learning culture (Dearing Report 1997, West Report 1997).

Combining these various discussions, contexts and frameworks, we entered into a research process designed to produce a course in professional communication that was responsive to the needs of learners, educational institutions, industry sector, culture and society.

Empirical Inquiry

We based our inquiry on constructivist² beliefs, that is the nature of knowledge as individual reconstructions coalescing around consensus. While multiple knowledges coexist, these constructions are subject to continuous revision which may lead to change when disparate constructions are juxtaposed in a dialectical context (Guba and Lincoln 1994). We believe that knowledge accumulation (creation/production) is a matter of more informed and sophisticated reconstructions. Our study reflects the value placed on the transfer of knowledge from one setting to another through the provision of opportunities such as vicarious experiences.

Soft systems (Checkland 1981, 1990) and co-evolution (Noorgard 1994) methodologies guided our research design. These methodologies are participatory and interactive and accommodate the changing factors of a complex scenario. Soft systems methodology explores unstructured experiences for the purpose of understanding and mapping them, creating a model and then improving that model in practice. It is used when there is unease or uncertainty about a situation or where change is apparent or needs to occur. It differs from hard systems research where there is a predefined and theoretically achievable endpoint.

Co-evolution provides a methodological tool to help explain changing social and environmental situations and relationships. It provides a means of designing and redesigning situations that are characterised as developments. The process is based on the desire for developments to become sustainable. It assumes that sustainable developments can be achieved when they are designed as mutually interactive.

The co-evolutionary process involves considering values, knowledge, organisation, environment and technology when designing or redesigning a development. In pursuing a learner-centred curriculum, we were guided by educational principles of adult learning. We drew on Boud's (1988) account of the needs of adult learners in the process of achieving autonomy in their learning; the work of Brookfield (1985) who focused on developing self directed learning for professionals; and Schon's (1987) study on the nature and education requirement of the reflective practitioner. The research and curriculum design was also informed by learning models including experiential learning (Kolb 1984); problem-based learning (Barrow 1986); group learning (Johnson, Johnson and Smith 1991); collaborative learning (Bruffee 1993); and situated learning (Wolfson and Willinsky 1997).

Our approach to the project was to involve working journalists and public relations practitioners in a six stage research plan. The research plan was developed iteratively. The six stages³ occurred between June 1996 and December 1997 and involved:

1. Assessing what professional communicators, specifically journalists and public relations practitioners, wanted, expected, needed, and desired from a postgraduate program.
2. Developing a test module and proposed program based on these findings.
3. Running the test module with a small number of journalists and public relations practitioners.
4. Running an existing postgraduate subject using these findings.
5. Assessing what managers responsible for authorising or providing public relations and journalism training needed and

wanted for current and potential staff.

6. Developing a tertiary program of learning for professional communicators, particularly journalists and public relations practitioners, which embraces the findings of the previous stages.

In light of our contextual factors, principles for the development and implementation of emerging courses in professional communication can be summarised as follows:

1. Support learners in developing their own curriculum from a set of possibilities specifically devised to meet their professional information and skills needs and perceived gaps in knowledge and advanced practice.

2. Develop the learners abilities to participate meaningfully and reflectively in discourses surrounding specialised knowledge, informed professional practice and discipline-building research.

3. Encourage the learners exploration of a variety of perspectives from a range of different paradigms in a sceptical and critical manner.

4. Develop the learners abilities to analyse, argue and enter into open dialogue with industry, academia and other learners.

5. Encourage the learners exploration of the possible effects of research and practice, with an appreciation of ethical relativism. Cultivate an understanding that the outcomes of professional communication practice are assessed in international domains.

6. Cultivate opportunities for, and support the testing of, learners thoughts and actions in pragmatic situations.

7. Support the learners as they recognise, develop and appraise their own learning styles and outcomes.

8. Integrate into learning situations an appreciation of the role of discipline building research. This may stem from the application of research and theory to practice, or from practice-based research that informs ongoing curriculum development. This reciprocity should be an important feature of professional communication.

Suggested Features Of Postgraduate Programme

Our work leads us to suggest five features that should be considered when developing a professional communication postgraduate program. These features are: modularised program and subject construction; situated learning; learning contracts; a learning community; and partnerships. These are based on the role of tertiary education as a provider of professional development and lifelong learning opportunities. Tertiary education helps to bring out advanced capabilities, and supports study to acquire knowledge and understand knowledge.

The features support outcomes guided by an accreditation

perspective or a personal learning perspective. These features support the principles discussed above and provide methods that can integrate skills, practice and critical analysis into a project-based or work-place driven approach. They accommodate a flexible, learner-centred mode of offer and delivery. They also encourage the development of the person. That is, to support the journalist or public relations practitioner in the process of becoming a professional that is aware of, and can act on ideas and situations beyond their own experience.

As a result of exploring different approaches to program and subject construction over the last three years, we favour construction using three components: providing information, providing structured instruction to attain advanced skills and providing support to seek knowledge. In this way the professional has two options: firstly, to use the institution as a clearinghouse for high quality, structured information suitable to practice-based situations, that is bought then used as required; secondly, to take the further step of engaging with the material in a more diligent way as a learner and build modules or units towards a postgraduate qualification.

By modularising subject content and staggering the level of commitment to a program three things can be achieved:

1. The quality of information and research findings to the professions can be maintained at a high level, therefore improving the overall amount and quality of material informing practice.

2. The process, content and expectations of postgraduate programs can become more familiar to professionals, making the courses or modules more accessible and less mystifying.

3. Professionals can be encouraged to embark on programs of study in manageable steps rather than being forced to commit to a two or three year program. This would make postgraduate qualifications appear more achievable and practically attuned to workplace needs from the outset.

Research with potential journalism and public relations students (Harris and Withnall 1997; Withnall and Harris, 1998) suggests that professional communicators are reluctant to learn theories and explore current issues that enable self-reflexivity, or at least a greater appreciation of context in making communication choices. Situated learning can provide a familiar starting point for students, support positive exploration, and help them appraise and understand the why of real-life communication problems in their workplace. It supports seamlessness (Rippey 1993), the continuity of one's work and one's development as a professional. It implies continuity of experience, a natural progression.

One of the keys to the practical applicability of any postgraduate program in professional communication is the

adoption of individually negotiated learning contracts for a workplace-based project. In subjects and modules we taught over the three years, the immediate relevance of the learning and assessment tasks to current work commitments encouraged learners to treat their program as a confluence with their employment. This led to a demonstrable increase in the quality of assessment product showing a deeper level of critical and analytical thinking in learners.

By employing principles of situated learning which focused on authentic or simulated workplace-based learning, it was found that diligent learners became interested in the culture of learning (Rogoff in Wolfson and Willinsky 1997) rather than the learning tasks themselves. This interest can be expanded through expression of the idea of communities of practice (Wolfson and Willinsky 1997) which helps learners consider problems situated within and posed by the structures and values of a particular culture, in this case, the professional communication culture in their program and workplace. Ultimately, a culture of learning and communities of practice can evolve to become a learning community.

The establishment of partnerships between tertiary institutions and industry for the purpose of refining programs that meet continuing professional development education outcomes and postgraduate qualifications, is likely to accelerate professionalisation in journalism and public relations. By working more closely together on standards and a system of accreditation of short courses and other forms of continuing education, more flexible ways of building a postgraduate qualification through a range of professional education options in specified areas may emerge. If tertiary institutions consult with industry on these links, more flexible options could be made available to professional communicators and, in turn, enhance the quality of continuing professional development and the standard of qualification among industry professionals.

Conclusion

Approaching education in professional communication from diverse perspectives promotes innovation in the way we conceive and deliver postgraduate programs. By exploring educational options with learners and industry collaboratively, we can shape courses pedagogically and still accommodate the needs of learners and industry. An ongoing process of research, consultation, trial learning situations and evaluation helps shape professional communication programs for public relations practitioners and journalists alike. Through collaboration, subjects and programs can be positioned in a competitive market without

compromising disciplinary integrity and disciplinary growth. This collaboration facilitates links with industry and contributes to increased professionalisation of the individual and industries encompassed by the term professional communication.

NOTES

1. Attributes of Mode 1 and Mode 2 Knowledge Production, based on Gibbons et al (1994). Mode 1: Knowledge produced in the context of an academic community or in the interests of a specific community; disciplinarity; hierarchy and homogeneity; accountable to the social and cognitive norms of the community.
Mode 2: Knowledge produced in the context of application; transdisciplinarity; heterogeneity and organisational diversity; socially accountable and reflexive.
2. Constructivism is a qualitative research paradigm. Its set of basic beliefs according to Guba and Lincoln in Denzin and Lincoln (1994) are: ontology, relativism epistemology, transactional and subjectivist methodology, hermeneutical and dialectical.
3. **Editor's Note:** Details of the six stages were provided by the authors in the original manuscript. Due to space limitations, the lengthy description was omitted. However, the authors have agreed to provide the details to interested researchers via the electronic mail.

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