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Problem Based Learning, Youth Suicide And Media's Response...Ability

Since 1993, Australian Federal governments have tried many initiatives to address the growing tendency of young Australians to take their own lives. Most recently, these efforts have focused on the pre-employment education and training of professional groups likely to affect the issue in a significant way. This article considers the results of the Youth Suicide National University Curriculum Project, which seeks, in part, to influence the professional education of journalists. Trials of the journalism materials at four Australian universities reveal that the use of a problem-based learning (PBL) approach resulted in a significant increase in students' perceived competence and confidence in their ability to report about suicide in such a way as to avoid causing harm to others. The trials also revealed significant and widespread support among students for a problem-based approach to learning.

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The "Youth Suicide Prevention: National University Curriculum Project" was funded by the Australian Federal Government as part of the National Youth Suicide Prevention Strategy. Its aim was to impact on the pre-employment education of professional groups so that graduates of targeted professional groups could play a constructive role in reducing the impact of suicide and suicidal behaviour among young people. Within this broad objective, four professional groups were identified as having a significant influence on those affected by suicidal behaviour. These groups were journalists, doctors, nurses and secondary school teachers. The aim with these groups was to ensure that graduates were knowledgeable about the issue of youth suicide, aware of the roles they play as professionals in addressing the problem and skilled in negotiating these roles. During 1997 Hunter Institute of Mental Health, the project sponsor, surveyed undergraduate courses in nine professional disciplines at all
Australian universities before selecting journalism as a group likely to influence the problem of youth suicide in an indirect or structural way. Mental health research (Hassan 1995; Goldney 1989; Jobes et al 1996 and others) has previously suggested that media reporting can influence the thinking of a suicidal person. Hassan concluded that media had the potential to reduce the likelihood of suicide.

In a pluralistic democratic society, it is recognised that the media must report public interest stories and should not be subject to censorship; however, bearing in mind the possible impact of media reports on vulnerable people, a more careful and sensitive approach to reporting suicide may reduce this impact, resulting in fewer deaths. (Hassan 1995:483)

Jobes agreed, and his study of media reporting following the death of U.S musician Kurt Cobain found that less sensational reporting, in this case emphasising the fragile mental health of the dead man and the availability of support services for those similarly afflicted, took a positive message to the community with a reach few other initiatives could accomplish. (Jobes 1996:271)

The focus of the curriculum materials (see Sheridan Burns & Hazell 1998) was on developing the ability of the graduate to respond appropriately to a suicide situation. In keeping with the professional education objectives, each of the curriculum units was based on one of three hypothetical scenarios or “case studies” which were common to all four disciplines. In the case of the journalism materials, two modules were provided. The first centred around a news writing task. It required students to explore the role of journalism in defining and reinforcing community attitudes about suicide while negotiating the task of writing about a suicide. To do this, students had to make and justify decisions about inclusion and exclusion of information provided, some of which was intrusive and or sensational.

The second module, a feature writing exercise, called for students to conduct an in-depth study of one of the factors contributing to suicidal behaviour. While not focusing directly on the topic of youth suicide, but on one of the range of contributing factors, students were required to read widely about numerous aspects, ranging from geographical isolation to sexuality problems. The journalism modules were written to fit within the core disciplinary areas of news writing and feature writing, so no substantial changes to existing curricula were needed to accommodate the materials. Because universities use different approaches to teaching the resources were written flexibly to support this variety. Journalism modules were written from a problem-based (PBL) perspective, but the use of case studies
allowed for their use with more didactic approaches. For example, lecturers could prepare lectures from the tutorial notes, recommended references and the various readings in the General Resources Package provided with the materials. In addition, students were provided with a summary of the ways in which the media might minimise the potential for harm arising from any coverage of suicide stories or of the general issue of suicide in society.

Use of problem based learning

During the 1997 survey of universities conducted prior to identifying the appropriate disciplines for inclusion in the project, academic feedback was sought regarding the preferred pedagogical approach. Despite the fact that problem-based learning (PBL) is not widely used in Australian journalism education, ten of the 12 responses from journalism schools opted for a PBL approach. This articulated well with the professional focus of the project, in which participants must go beyond recognising the dilemmas inherent in a situation and decide on an appropriate course of action. The “lived” experience provided by PBL was considered by the project team to also be an important factor in developing confidence and a sense of competence in students yet to experience the real event. Problem-based learning is an approach to teaching and learning that is based in the “real world” of ill-structured problems faced by professionals.

By valuing process over product and learning over teaching, it aims to develop life-long learning skills so that graduates can apply their knowledge and understanding to new situations. According to Albanese and Mitchell (1993), who undertook a comprehensive meta-analysis of PBL, this approach accommodates developing sophistication of thinking "...it (PBL) allows students to explore (actual) cases in increasing complexity commensurate with their developing understanding of basic principles." (Albanese & Mitchell 1993:52).

Problem-based learning -- active, constructive and reflective -- is the closest tertiary students can get to the life experienced after graduation. They must work co-operatively to identify and evaluate what they know, what they don't know and those crucial questions they don't at first know that they don't know. This, it may be argued, more accurately reflects the workplace culture students will encounter after graduation where even the most competitive workplaces still rely on small teams.

Journalists routinely look to at least one or two of their
colleagues to seek contacts, to discuss angles and negotiate problems in "getting the story". They also work in small teams with photographers or camera crews. Barrows (1985:6) found that PBL problems differ from typical case studies in that they do not (initially) provide or synthesise all the information needed to solve the problem. Therefore, he argued, they provide greater realism and free inquiry. As well as enabling students to become more adaptable in applying skills and experiential learning, PBL offers an opportunity for students to consider contextual issues in a structured way as part of their professional studies.

This is particularly pertinent to the aims and objectives of journalism education because, in journalism, "every decision is a professional decision, moral decision and a commercial decision" (Sheridan Burns 1995:2). PBL provides a structure by which decision-making skills are taught along with, and as part of, writing and research skills. A large number of empirical studies of PBL programs in other disciplines (Albanese and Mitchell (1993); Bligh et al (1978) and others), in which lectures were compared with other methods, suggest that while lectures are as good as other methods of conveying information, they are less effective than group discussion, independent study or student-centred teaching in developing thinking or in changing attitudes. Abercrombie (1979) argues PBL broadens learning opportunities beyond the transfer of factual knowledge and generalisations.

While not in the least wishing to belittle this kind of learning, opportunity for much besides can be given in various kinds of discussion groups. It is possible, for instance, to organise discussion groups whose main aim is to help participants discover their own basic assumptions, hitherto unrecognised (Abercrombie 1979:3).

McKeachie and Kulik (1975:25) also found that PBL strategies provided "better results for thinking, motivation and attitude measures." The thinking skills required by the graduate practitioner are identified, prescribed, practised and evaluated. In journalism education the thinking skills required include negotiation of complex social, philosophical and economic contexts. Barell (1995) argues that PBL requires more than active learning.

PBL incorporates active learning, critical and creative thinking by suspending the guessing game of 'What's the answer the teacher wants to hear?'... Students must gather information of significance to the problem, assessing its credibility and its validity. In bringing the task, or problem, to acceptable closure with evidence to support decisions, students are held to high benchmarks of thinking (Barell 1995:128).

Albanese and Mitchell found that students respond
Studies Of Student Responses To PBL

Students clearly prefer this approach. There is very little evidence yet as to justify any claim that they emerge any different from other students but they certainly enjoy themselves far more along the way ... We find ourselves presented with two radically different approaches, which cost the same, but one is more enjoyable than the other. The choice appears analogous to the choice between sex and artificial insemination (Norman 1988:285).

Critics of PBL argue that it is a learning style that suits only a certain type of student. Drinan (1991) found that PBL was better suited to mature students than those just matriculated from secondary school because it was too easy for “students to believe that they are only required to solve the problem and so guess their way from problem to solution” (p319) without engaging the deeper issues. He asked how PBL courses could ensure the transfer of an explicit body of knowledge with touching on it directly. And he pondered whether university academics were generally suited to the role of PBL facilitator.

Facilitation requires attributes which are substantially different to the usual ones on which academic staff are hired. A genuine and personal care for students, and a real enthusiasm for learning, are probably the most crucial qualities in such persons (Drinan 1991:319).

Background to the Response Ability Trials

During 1997, a first draft of the journalism materials were reviewed by two senior journalism academics -- Dr Michael Meadows (Griffith University) and Mr Ian Richards (University of South Australia); and mental health experts Dr Robert Goldney (University of Adelaide), Dr Chris Lennings (University of Sydney) and Ms Lesley Roxbee (Commonwealth Department of Health & Human Services). An overall review of the materials was also undertaken by the Centre for Advancement of Learning & Teaching at The University of Newcastle. The second draft of the materials, titled “Response...Ability”, was introduced to journalism educators at the 1997 Journalism Education Association conference in Sydney, at which a number of universities agreed
to participate in formal evaluations of the effectiveness of the curriculum materials.

In recognition that each university has different processes for deciding such matters, the participating universities were not given any particular instructions about how the modules should articulate within existing curricula. Each field trial centre made its own decision regarding the most suitable subject area within which to trial the material. The evaluation, implemented by the project co-ordinator, the Hunter Institute of Mental Health, sought to measure changes in students’ knowledge and attitudes toward the issue of youth suicide before and after exposure to the curriculum materials. This was done by requiring students to respond to a number of affirmative statements regarding their knowledge about suicide, attitudes about suicide and the role of media in affecting attitudes and knowledge about suicide (see tables).

On completion of the curriculum units, students were also asked for feedback about their interest in the materials and their perceptions about the usefulness of the modules. During 1998, 175 students at four universities participated in the trials and evaluation. In recognition of the fact that most students were in the high-risk age group for suicide, participating educators were also provided with strategies for dealing with students distressed by the issues raised in the modules. For example, a student at one university was exempted from participation after a suicide in her family just days before the trials began.

**Evaluation of the Response...Ability Materials**

The authors set out to document the actual experience of field trial centres in using the curriculum materials to determine the strengths and any weaknesses in the material that might pose barriers to further dissemination. The evaluation was undertaken in a series of field trials in four universities – Central Queensland University, Griffith University, The University of Newcastle and University of Western Sydney. Three levels of evaluation were undertaken:

i) feedback from lecturers via telephone interviews;

ii) student feedback from surveys implemented at the end of the trial; and

iii) student knowledge and attitudes, measured before and after the trial. The project team designed the evaluation instruments (see Sheridan Burns & Hazell 1998) and sent them to participating centres for distribution to students.
Evaluation Methodology -- Students

Students' attitudes to suicide in general, to the role of their profession in relation to suicide prevention and in relation to their own capacity to intervene were measured using an 11-item questionnaire in which students indicated agreement on a 4 point Likert scale. The statistical significance of changes in agreement with attitude statements was tested using the 2 statistic. Surveys were used to measure changes in the student's knowledge and attitudes before and after use of the materials. In addition, the questions sought feedback on the impact on students' attitudes to suicide prevention generally and to prevention within their profession. The statistical significance of changes in mean knowledge scores was tested using the t-test for unmatched groups. The students were also asked to comment on the difficulty of the material, whether it was interesting, relevant and suited their individual learning style.

Factors such as teaching environment, teaching method, time allocated, and assessment procedures may be additional factors in determining the extent of attitudinal change. These variables were not controlled in this evaluation design. Due to time pressures, it was not possible to test these measures for reliability prior to their use. Knowledge questionnaires were collected from student journalists in four trial centres, involving a total of 175 students. Due to the time pressures of the project, it was not possible to test these measures for reliability prior to their use. It is recognised that a ten-item questionnaire cannot possibly explore the full range of knowledge transfer, but a more extensive instrument was impossible due to the need to minimise the time involved in student evaluation. Academics had indicated that a complicated evaluation instrument would take up too much class time and would reduce the response rate.

Evaluation Methodology -- Academics

Academics involved in the trials were interviewed by telephone. The interviews were taped with the permission of the interviewees. The aims of the taped telephone interviews were to determine how the curriculum materials were used in each of the trial centres and to obtain feedback from the lecturers involved. A semi-structured interview technique was used, in which general and open-ended questions were used initially, followed by more specific and closed questions towards the end of the interview to clarify points. Information was sought from trial participants regarding components of the curriculum materials used and whether the materials were modified. Participants were asked to
comment on the clarity and presentation of the coursework materials, and whether they were sufficient to achieve their stated aims. Academics were further asked whether the materials were relevant to the learning goals of their course. They were asked to describe their teaching methods and comment about the appropriateness of the PBL approach taken. Feedback from lecturers on the content and teaching approach of the curriculum materials was used to identify features of the material requiring further development and any additional materials needed. With respect to the General Resources Package, participants were asked which modules were used, how were they used, and which were most useful and asked for suggestions for additional topics. In relation to all the materials, academics were asked whether there was too much material, whether using the material increased the emphasis on knowledge and skills relevant to youth suicide and whether they would continue to use the materials. They were also asked if the materials had distressed any students, and how this was addressed.

Trial centres were free to decide how to accommodate the resources within their curriculum. The resources were written to articulate with existing curriculum units on news-writing and feature writing and invariably this was how they were used.

Constraints in the Evaluation Design

Several constraints were perceived at the outset of the evaluation and others were encountered during the evaluation. These need to be understood in order to fully appreciate the findings of the evaluation. First there was wide variation in teaching approaches at participating centres. No two trial centres behaved in the same way. Trial results varied from centre to centre and cross comparison must be conducted carefully. Trials were conducted within time constraints and dependent on involvement of academics. As lecturers involved in the trial were responsible for selecting the curriculum resources they would use, it is possible, if not likely, that they may have chosen not to use all those resources that focus on the knowledge items being tested (eg prevalence or risk factors). They may also have chosen to emphasise aspects not tested by the questionnaire.

Further, academics took very different approaches to making the actual printed resources available to students. Potential for change in knowledge was sometimes limited by actual topics chosen by students. Pre-testing would have identified ambiguities in some knowledge and attitude questions. Additionally, as this evaluation approach did not include any controls, it is difficult to interpret changes in knowledge (or the absence of change) to the
Response ... Ability Trials  
Results

There were some problems in collecting the same number of completed surveys at pre and post-test. There are other factors which are likely to influence the extent of knowledge change, including the teaching environment, class size, year of study, teaching method, and approaches to assessment.

The results are shown in Table 1 below. Significant changes in knowledge were achieved in just two of ten questions. Importantly to the objectives of the project, however, these two questions related to knowledge of the rates of suicide and knowledge that the method of suicide should not be reported by journalists. No significant change was seen in other items, although mean scores for item 1 were fairly high at baseline. Overall total knowledge scores improved significantly. However, this was only true for two of the four centres. Interestingly, mean knowledge scores by journalism students were higher than those of student teachers at baseline and at follow-up. Whether this finding suggests that potential journalists, or those who choose to study it, are more aware and empathetic than other groups in society is a topic for further research.

Table 1: Change in Mean Scores on Knowledge Questions - Journalism

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Baseline (n = 175)</th>
<th>Follow-up (n = 137)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Causes</td>
<td>0.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Rates</td>
<td>0.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Definition</td>
<td>0.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Definition</td>
<td>0.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Rates</td>
<td>0.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Methods</td>
<td>0.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Risk Factors</td>
<td>0.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Responses</td>
<td>0.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>J spec</td>
<td>0.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>J spec</td>
<td>0.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>4.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median</td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mode</td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

** p < .01  *** p < .001
The measurement of knowledge transfer was fraught with difficulty. As outlined above, the project team was required to limit the knowledge questionnaire to allow for its easy completion at the beginning or end of a lecture or tutorial session. On the whole, the questionnaire items focused on specific content, which was covered in the modules of General Resources Package. From the interviews that have been conducted with academics involved in the trial, it seems that it was not common practice to make all of this material available to the students. Some academics did use the material to inform themselves and to prepare an introductory lecture, but it is unlikely that students were consistently exposed to those materials, which were relevant to correctly answering the questionnaire items. This effect was demonstrated particularly in schools of journalism which focused more on the teaching of the practice of journalism rather than on items such as definitions, rates, causes etc. Nonetheless, overall knowledge did improve in a statistically significant way.

Attitude questionnaires were collected from student journalists in four trial centres, involving a total of 175 students. The results are shown in Table 8 below. There was almost no change in the attitude scores for items reflecting general attitudes to the issue of youth suicide. The attitude that there is very little anyone can do to help a suicidal person declined significantly from 13.3% to 6.2%. The range at follow-up was 0.0% to 8.2%. There were fewer problems in implementing a quantitative measure of attitude change. In all disciplines there was a statistically significant change in agreement with attitudinal statements which reflect an increase in the students’ confidence and perceived competence. This perhaps reflects the greater use of curriculum modules over the General Resources Package in most universities means that greater emphasis would have placed on the specific responses for journalism.

Changes in Confidence & Competence

Exposure to these materials within their normal teaching environment has apparently led to a significant increase in confidence and competence in students.

There was a significant increase in the proportion of students who felt that they had enough knowledge to write a story in such a way as to avoid causing harm to readers who might have mental health problems. At the follow-up, 61.1% of students agreed with this statement, compared to 22.7% of students at baseline. Similarly, the proportion of students who thought they could help readers to understand this difficult behaviour rose significantly from 22.2% at baseline to 61.3% at follow-up.
### Table 2: Change in Agreement with Attitudinal Statements - Journalism

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>General Attitudes to Suicide</th>
<th>% Agree at Baseline (n=175)</th>
<th>% Agree at Follow-up (n=137)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>It is dangerous to bring up the subject of suicide when talking with someone who is having lots of problems</td>
<td>39.9</td>
<td>32.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Even if a young person's life has been very hard and their future appears truly hopeless, they should not see suicide as a real option</td>
<td>88.4</td>
<td>88.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If an adolescent has actually decided to commit suicide, there is very little anyone can do to help.</td>
<td>13.3</td>
<td>6.2*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If a young person is experiencing great difficulties and is thinking of suicide, they can be helped to cope better and to be more optimistic.</td>
<td>93.6</td>
<td>96.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Media's Response to Suicide**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>% Agree at Baseline (n=175)</th>
<th>% Agree at Follow-up (n=137)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The newspaper cannot possibly be responsible for the impact that its stories might have on any of its readers.</td>
<td>16.3</td>
<td>12.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journalists should not have to tailor their stories to the wishes of mental health advocates or government officials.</td>
<td>36.5</td>
<td>32.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If I wrote a story about suicide and the editor wanted to bury it I would be upset.</td>
<td>56.1</td>
<td>52.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Confidence / Competence**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>% Agree at Baseline (n=175)</th>
<th>% Agree at Follow-up (n=137)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I feel I know enough to write a story about suicide in such a way as to avoid causing any harm to readers who might have mental health problems.</td>
<td>22.7</td>
<td>61.1***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If during an interview with someone who is bereaved the person told me that they sometimes felt like ending their own life I would know what to do.</td>
<td>24.3</td>
<td>37.5*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel I have enough knowledge about the risk factors for youth suicide to help readers to understand this difficult behaviour.</td>
<td>22.2</td>
<td>61.3***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* p<0.05   *** p<0.001
was a significant increase in the percentage of students who believed that they would know what to do if a person they were interviewing said that they felt like ending their life (37.5% at follow-up).

Lecturers took a variety of approaches to modifying their existing curriculum in order to accommodate these new resources. It was clear that these decisions were made at the lecturer level -- individuals were empowered to vary the content and broad approach of the courses they taught, provided this did not involve additional teaching resources (eg additional tutors). The curriculum materials were written with a problem-based learning approach in mind. However the case studies could quite easily be used in a more traditional tutorial setting. The article entitled "Principles for writing safe stories about youth suicide" (Hazell 1997) was the most commonly used resource.

Usefulness of Materials

The feedback from academics involved was very positive and, based on their comments, the project team is confident that the resources are robust, comprehensive, relevant, realistic and useful, both as resources for teaching and as facilitators of student learning. The early assumption that academics would not simply follow lesson plans was born out by the varied descriptions of the ways in which academics had used the resources. These reveal a thoughtful and intelligent interaction with the resources. This treatment of the resources means that their wide applicability was thoroughly tested and it was the resources seem to have been successfully integrated within a broad spectrum of academic approaches and preferences. In those centres which used the feature writing module, lecturers claimed that those students who accessed the resources achieved at a very high level. The resources were unanimously described as credible, reliable, comprehensive and up to date. Several centres reported incidents where students had became distressed by the subject matter, but these incidents appear to have been resolved positively. All academics had been prepared for this situation and had implemented strategies to alert students to the sensitivity of the topic and the availability of help resources. Of course, many centres reported no negative reaction at all. In response to this question, academics often mentioned that students were very interested in the issue and of the potential role of their profession in addressing it.
Relevance to Journalism Education

Academics reported that the fact that the resources articulated directly into the current curriculum components of news writing and feature writing was appreciated and noted that the document entitled "Principles of Safe Writing about Suicide" was viewed as particularly useful for the teaching of this issue. All participants agreed that the issue was a very relevant one for journalism and that this made the package of resources particularly useful.

Student Feedback

Student feedback was obtained by means of the "Student Perception of the Topic" questionnaire. An assessment of the student's attitudes towards the "Response...Ability" resources was obtained by means of a 12 item questionnaire in which students were asked to indicate their agreement on a 4 point Likert scale and by an open-ended question. The items sought student's views on the following aspects of the resources: relevance; interest; and ease of use. Data was also collected on whether students perceived that their understanding of the issue and their role had increased. Student feedback was from four schools of journalism. Results are shown in the Table 3.

Usefulness of Materials

With respect to student perception of the relevance of the materials, at least 70% of journalism students (range 50.0% to 82.4%) agreed that the issue was relevant for their career. The fact that over 90% of students also perceived that the case studies were realistic is a strong endorsement of this aspect of the "Response...Ability" resources. More than 70% of journalism students indicated that because of this topic, they had developed an interest in the issue of youth suicide and in how their profession could respond. Again this is a very positive result. Further, for each discipline, students indicate that they have a greater awareness of and understanding of the role that their profession can play in prevention of suicide.

Student Response to PBL

Another significant finding of the evaluation was very high level of support among students for a problem-based approach to learning. Between 77% and 84% (average 81.3%) of all
Table 3: Students' Agreement with Statements about their Interest in the Materials

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>% Agreement (Range)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The case studies presented in the materials were realistic</td>
<td>93.2 (90.9 - 100)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The material about youth suicide was relevant to my career</td>
<td>71.17 (50 - 82.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The curriculum material about youth suicide was interesting</td>
<td>93.3 (91.2 - 100)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have developed an interest in the issue and how my profession can respond</td>
<td>73.5 (61.5 - 83.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The material on youth suicide was presented in a way that suited my own learning style.</td>
<td>81.3 (76.9 - 83.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The case study helped me to learn about the topic.</td>
<td>93.3 (88.2 - 96.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I now understand the problem of youth suicide better</td>
<td>91.5 (84.4 - 94.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doing this topic has helped me to understand ways in which a journalist could minimise harm to those who are at risk of suicide.</td>
<td>94.0 (88.2 - 100)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The material on youth suicide was not very difficult to understand.</td>
<td>89.9 (70 - 94.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There was not too much material on the topic of youth suicide in this course.</td>
<td>80.9 (87 - 100)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
journalism students surveyed indicated that PBL suited "my own learning style." This finding may be particularly significant given that PBL is generally not used in Australian journalism education. Over 90% of students (91.2% - 100%) agreed that the materials were interesting. The data provides strong evidence that students felt that they had learned a great deal about the topic as a result of their course. The data indicates that most students did not find the topic very difficult. At least 75% of students did not think that there was too much material on the topic, despite some groups spending up to four weeks of class time on the subject.

Conclusion

The project was designed to trial an innovative and somewhat ambitious intervention: to influence the way in which professional education is provided at universities. At the beginning of the project, certain resistance to change was expected from academics arising from two factors: evidence from the national survey of overcrowded curricula and a degree of professional resistance to an external agenda. In fact, a call for universities to participate in trials yielded more offers than could be accommodated.

Measured against its initial objectives, the Response...Ability project for journalism has been broadly successful so far. In his final report to the Federal Government, Hazell (1999) notes that no changes to the journalism materials were suggested as a result of the 1998 trials. The evaluations demonstrated that students significantly increased their levels of confidence and competence in their ability to report about suicide as a result of using the materials and were more aware of the effect of media reporting. They also consciously enjoyed the problem-based approach and opportunity for open inquiry. Academics reported that the materials were credible, useful and relevant to their teaching and that they could fit in their existing programs. They supported the idea that concepts proposed by the Response...Ability project should be included in their curricula.

The dissemination phase of the Response...Ability project is now underway, with the full materials available free of charge from the Hunter Institute of Mental Health website at www.himh.org.au/Origin.html. The extent to which the materials are adopted nationally will be monitored and evaluated in a separate project commenced in 1999.
REFERENCES


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