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## Training political reporters during a federal election: The UniPollWatch student journalism project

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## Training political reporters during a federal election: The UniPollWatch student journalism project

### Abstract

UniPollWatch was the largest student journalism project ever undertaken in Australia. Approximately 1000 students from 28 universities worked to cover the 2016 federal election. The project aimed to provide effective training on political reporting in a work-integrated learning environment. Utilising a combination of analysis and descriptions of the project and a survey research methodology, the results of this project suggest that by placing student reporters in the midst of a fluid and highly contested election environment they learn by observing and doing. The project demonstrated that students' attitudes to, and aptitude for, covering politics varied greatly, but that the skills needed for political reporting can be improved through projects such as UniPollWatch.

### Keywords

UniPollWatch, work-integrated learning, journalism education, political journalism

## Introduction

Elections are dynamic, contested and fundamental to democracy. They, therefore, provide opportunities to engage students in authentic civic reporting for the public's benefit. Reporters require both broad and focused knowledge and a set of specific skills in order to provide useful coverage. In addition, Australian federal elections are too complex and multidimensional for any one university to cover comprehensively. This means they lend themselves to cooperative newsgathering and cross-university teaching collaboration. It was this combination of factors that led to 28 universities working together to cover the 2016 federal election under the banner of UniPollWatch 2016. It was the largest student journalism project ever undertaken in Australia, and it emerged from a similar project in which four universities covered the most marginal electorates in the 2014 state election in Victoria (Dodd et al., 2015). As members of the editorial committee overseeing the 2016 project, the authors observed the implementation of innovative and traditional approaches to political reporting and saw how students responded to the challenges of covering politics during a closely fought election campaign. Utilising a combination of analysis and descriptions of the project, and a survey research methodology, this project suggests this type of teaching hospital-style; WIL can be effective in training journalism students to be political reporters.

## Literature Review

Journalism students have often been overlooked in media research (Hanusch, 2013; Hanusch et al., 2015), and there has also been an absence of detailed scholarship into their reporting in the political sphere (Dodd et al., 2015). There has been considerable debate in research regarding the balance between practical skills and theoretical understanding in journalism education, with these approaches often in conflict (for examples see Cervi et al., 2020; Cole, 2006; Hanusch, 2013; Wall, 2017). Animated discussions over whether the focus should be on vocational pursuits or a traditional liberal university education are a historical feature of journalism in the academy (see Picard, 2014; Reed, 2017). The pedagogical approach of the UniPollWatch project was a hands-on, work-integrated learning (WIL) program that included staff supervision to provide students with the opportunity to report, observe and engage in the political process around the 2016 Federal election. WIL combines academic learning and work experience, involves students gaining skills in preparation for work, and enhances their employability, in this case in journalism and media (De Villiers Scheepers et al., 2018; Jackson, 2015). WIL also links with the teaching-hospital approach (see Anderson et al., 2011; Davies et al., 2017; Martin et al., 2019), where mentors from tertiary and journalistic institutions guide student reporters of politics.

## Teaching political reporting

Political journalism is based on the foundations of watchdog and Fourth Estate approaches to neutral and objective reporting (see Donsbach & Patterson, 2004; Hanusch et al., 2015; Tuchman, 1972). However, it is important to note that the changing work practices and economic conditions, particularly in many Western newsrooms, have resulted in media often struggling to provide what Curran et al. (2009, p.6) describe as “meaningful public affairs information”. In the Australian political reporting context, Mellado et al. (2013, p. 867) have outlined the nation's “long history of watchdog journalism”, and it is within this sphere that this study of student-journalists reporting on a federal election is situated. To hold to account those wielding power in society sits at the core of the watchdog role of journalism. Although the corporate sector has grown in direct impact on daily lives, the actions and decisions of political representatives and their staff are still the most potent example of direct power in society. Furthermore, political power is exercised using public funds, which makes accountability via the journalism watchdog function even more important (Nai, 2019).

The study of politics and government at a tertiary level is considered important for journalism students and graduates, many of whom are likely to end up reporting on political issues when gaining employment. However, educating journalism students in political issues can take a range of forms, from traditional one-to-many lectures, to producing journalism in pop-up or temporary newsrooms. While socialising students for newsrooms has been a traditional approach of education, including in relation to political reporting (Bjørnsen et al., 2007), Mensing (2010, p. 517) has argued for greater focus on students building functioning communication structures in their communities, producing journalism within a network, and operating in journalism programs that “develop a culture of inquiry”. In discussing educating and training local journalists, Cole (2006) notes how instead of focusing on celebrities, those in regional media are more likely to interview local councillors about community issues. This can also apply to new journalists developing relationships with state and federal Members of Parliament. English et al. (2016) examined teaching government reporting, stating it was increasingly important due to changes in newsrooms operating with increasingly limited resources, including an absence of senior mentors (see Mason, 2020; McNair et al., 2017; O’Donnell et al., 2015). They noted a dilution in the watchdog role of reporting among graduates in regional journalism and called for greater reinforcement of this in contemporary education.

In research into journalism students focusing on political elements, Hanusch et al. (2015) found more final year students in Australia considered the watchdog role important than those in their first year. Mellado et al. (2013) examined perceptions of students across seven countries through four dimensions: watchdog; citizen; loyal; and consumer-oriented. The citizen-oriented role received the greatest support across the nations, while the watchdog role ranked highly, and was the strongest dimension in Australia. However, Hanusch et al (2016) conclude the idea of reporting on political rounds among Australian students was less popular, with a greater focus on entertainment. In support, Hanusch et al. (2015) found among journalism students that 37.5 per cent were very or extremely interested in politics, with less than a third somewhat interested. Again, it is important to mention that teaching politics, and educating future reporters about the watchdog role, is valuable for preparing students for life in newsrooms. This approach is apparent in WIL projects such as UniPollWatch, which encourage students to engage in the process of political reporting. Further, they assist in what Hanusch et al. (2015) describe as the moulding of student journalists in the industry’s image through experiential learning (see Dodd et al., 2015).

A range of scholars have discussed the need for journalism programs to utilise a teaching-hospital model, including having a focus on innovation (Anderson et al. 2011; Davies et al., 2017; Francisco et al. 2012; Martin et al., 2019; Young & Giltrow 2015.) The teaching hospital model for journalism is based on the long-established model of practicing medicine, teaching medical students and conducting medical research within the same institution. When journalism programs were set up in Australia, this WIL approach became the most common model. In this vein, a more recent form of learning occurs in pop-up newsrooms, which Wall (2015, p. 2017) describes as mobile news operations occurring in a temporary, virtual space. Wall (2017) notes the rise of this type of liquid journalism also includes utilising personal rather than professional equipment, a focus on social media, and building networks. These examples highlight the value of teaching core reporting tasks in combination with new and innovative skills. Specifically, Martin et al. (2019) recognise how Australian journalism programs are underpinned by WIL programs, which link with the teaching hospital approach, and also involve developing relationships with the media industry. They state the design of these programmes leads to “clear improvements in students’ learning of journalism skills” (Martin et al., 2019, p. 221). The UniPollWatch project involved both teaching hospital and pop-up newsroom elements, with reporting occurring in multiple temporary and virtual spaces.

Dodd et al. (2015) note the lack of examples of Australian journalism programs providing state and federal election coverage, however this type of project has been more popular in the United States.

In developing a pop-up newsroom for journalism students in California, Wall (2015, p. 124) states the project reflects that “news is a process”. This occurs through focusing on collecting “news in the moment”, often in public spaces, through social media sites such as Twitter and Facebook, rather than producing a “polished end-product” in a traditional newsroom (Wall 2015, p. 124). In this case, 67 students were responsible for covering five events, including the 2012 Presidential Election. Wall (2015, p. 134) concludes the idea of the pop-up newsroom challenges norms over student newsrooms being smaller versions of professional newsrooms, and suggests student journalism spaces provide “the place to strike out in new directions”. In other student-reporting examples, journalism graduate students from the City University of New York combined a pop-up newsroom with industry professionals in the Electionland project, which examined voting problems on polling day in the 2016 Presidential Election (see Dunkin, 2016; Electionland, 2016). Other examples of student election coverage in the US include Michigan State University’s social media and online reporting in 2012, and Stony Brook University’s focus on their campus community in the same year (MI First Election, 2012; SBUSJ, 2012). In New Zealand, Auckland University of Technology journalism students conducted multimedia and print reporting on the 2014 Fijian elections (Pacific Scoop, 2014). In Australia, Dodd et al. (2015) employed experiential learning at four universities – including approximately 260 students – that combined to report on the 2014 Victorian State election. They state the project not only provided real-world experience and industry engagement for students, but contributed to informing the community about the political campaign. The projects outlined in this brief discussion of pop-up student newsrooms provide examples of education, as outlined by Wall (2015), that involve training in traditional skills through WIL while ensuring adaptability and innovation in journalism’s evolving environment.

One of the benefits of utilising journalism students in reporting projects is that they can complete tasks on topics professional newsrooms are either unable to report on – due to resources or space priorities – or do not want to cover. Francisco et al. (2012) note these issues in hyperlocal reporting in journalism programs in the United States. They conclude student coverage “is value added to the nation’s news”, and provides a space for ideas and experiments in journalism programs (Francisco et al., 2012, p. 2695). It is important to note there are also weaknesses with student journalism content. Wall (2017) recognises how pop-up newsrooms are likely to create a form of hybrid content, which is more polished than citizens would deliver, but less developed than the work of professional journalists. However, Francisco et al. (2012, p. 2695) argue students are “not inexpensive novices displacing expensive reporters” when involved in these types of in-depth engagements.

The value provided by journalism students in projects such as UniPollWatch is particularly relevant in a media environment in Australia experiencing cutbacks in resources and increases in workloads (see Mason, 2020; McNair et al, 2017; O’Donnell et al., 2015). Variations of UniPollWatch have been applied in teaching and learning in Australia as part of the 2018 Victorian election, and the 2019 federal election. In a political sense, these considerations are also pertinent, particularly following criticism of mainstream media’s coverage in Western markets for misreading the mood of the broader electorate. Internationally, this has occurred in the United States with the 2016 Presidential election of Donald Trump, and in the United Kingdom with the failure of the media to predict the Brexit victory. In both cases, critics concluded the mainstream media was out of touch with voters outside major urban centres (for examples see Ingram, 2016; Vance, 2016). Similarly, in Australia during the 2016 federal election, the press gallery in Canberra was accused of operating as an echo chamber, missing the tight result of the final poll, and not covering key issues for the nation’s voters (see Reece, 2016). These criticisms reflect an opportunity for journalism programs to provide for their students broader and more inclusive coverage of political issues, particularly in multi-institution collaborations such as UniPollWatch. In reporting on election seats across the country, UniPollWatch combined traditional journalism approaches operating within pop-up newsrooms in 28 journalism programs to deliver innovative, digital election coverage. Importantly,

this paper does not seek to replicate descriptions of the project's general approach to pedagogy (Davies et al., 2017) or the ways it fostered collegiality (Dodd et al., 2018). Instead it focuses on its specific contribution to educating future political reporters.

## Method

A survey was employed at the end of the project to capture the data to examine the students' attitudes to, and aptitude for, covering politics. The full survey consisted of 47 questions, across a range of issues, many of which concern the project's logistics and other aspects of general pedagogy (see Davies et al., 2017). The findings in this project are based on student demographic questions along with key qualitative questions, which focus on students' awareness and engagement in politics and elections processes, changes over the course of the project, and publishing approaches to the student work. After gaining ethics approval, the survey was distributed to the 28 participating universities and directed to the campus editors who were all senior journalism academics. Twenty-six campus editors responded, making the response rate high at 93 per cent. The authors focused on surveying academic staff because the logistics involved in sampling graduate and undergraduate students at so many universities across Australia was considered near impossible to achieve, especially as many of the students who had participated in the project had graduated. This allowed the study to focus on the educators' pedagogical perceptions, including in relation to the implementation of innovative and traditional teaching approaches to political reporting. The authors considered academic staff were well positioned to reflect on the successes and shortcomings of the WIL aspects of the project as most had convened and observed discussions among students about the project's value. Both qualitative and quantitative responses were sought. These comments have been analysed for themes that informed the results and discussion sections.

## Pedagogical aims, challenges and opportunities

The 2016 UniPollWatch project harnessed the resources of approximately 1000 students and 70 academic staff at 28 universities in six states and one territory. At the outset organisers were aware that the project posed both challenges and created learning opportunities. By the project's end, approximately 700 separate stories had been published, including profiles of 333 House of Representatives and 26 Senate candidates, as well as 150 electorate profiles, 183 news stories, four explanatory stories and two distinct and unique data driven reporting exercises (see also Davies et al., 2017).

A stated pedagogical aim of the project's editorial committee was:

*We believe the best way to learn the skills of journalism is through practice, so this is also a place to develop and hone the craft of reporting. Journalism schools should be relevant and useful and should work for the public's benefit by sharing their work with general audiences.*

At the outset the organisers asked themselves what skills and knowledge a political reporter needed to be able to demonstrate to cover an election. The result was a project grounded in traditional political reportage, with a watchdog focus, and with an emphasis on creating common forms of coverage across the country's 150 lower house electoral divisions. The project was structured around these House of Representatives electorates, in part because their boundaries served as demarcations. This ensured universities knew exactly what territory and which candidates they were covering. In addition, electorate-based reportage allowed UniPollWatch to play to its greatest strengths, namely the geographical spread of the universities involved and the large number of students taking part.

All participating journalism program co-ordinators were asked to nominate how many electorates they could take on. A few took as many as ten, while several others reported on between one and

three. UniPollWatch's coverage provided basic information, including the sitting MP's name, party and term in office. Each electorate page also included newsworthy points about the seat. This was a deliberate request to encourage student reporters to think more deeply about what really mattered in that seat from a hyperlocal point of view and to serve the audience's needs by providing the most relevant information in a concise manner. As a result, UniPollWatch tended to go further than the cursory information provided on the Australian Electoral Commission's website. For example, the AEC's summation of the electorate of Indi merely listed its major towns and industries (AEC, 2016), whereas UniPollWatch delved into its politics:

*One of Victoria's largest electorates, in the state's northeast, Indi has traditionally been held by conservative parties. But it gained national attention when Independent Cathy McGowan defeated prominent Liberal Sophie Mirabella after a grassroots campaign in 2013. Mirabella, the only Liberal to lose a seat, will recontest Indi (UniPollWatch, 2016).*

Guidelines on writing electorate profiles were provided for every participating university. For example, students were asked by the editorial committee to write an 800-word article that "gives readers a really good understanding of the things that matter to the people of the electorate and why the electorate matters in the federal election". Many of the resulting electorate profiles were diverse and fresh because the project encouraged student reporters to focus on what was interesting, and important and to make judgements about the newsworthiness of what they covered.

Mentored by journalism scholars in a teaching hospital style (see Anderson et al., 2011; Davies et al., 2017; Martin et al., 2019), students were asked to assess the seat's electoral significance and how local issues and the local result might affect the national election. Foundation knowledge was not assumed and complex concepts were explained in detail. Students came from a mixed educational background spanning from first year to Master's level journalism students, and students at various levels studying political science. The framework for producing the stories varied, from large courses where more than 100 students worked in teams to cover the assigned electorates, to small teams of student reporter volunteers recruited specifically to the project. The watchdog role was studied in introductory courses in journalism at the participating universities. Consequently, the student reporters had a basic understanding of the concept, which was enhanced as illustrated by the survey and in the discussion in the conclusion below. A glossary of terms was appended to the website and the notes on writing electorate profiles described idiosyncratic ideas like bellwether seats. The differences between marginal and safe seats were spelt out and students were encouraged to treat both as important. In fact, it was a hallmark of the project that it gave serious consideration to those seats that rarely get a mention because the results are considered a foregone conclusion.

In many cases, electorate profiles were written under joint bylines, sometimes with many authors, reflecting the way those articles were compiled from several students' work. The process of researching and writing these stories was instructive as it gave students a deeper understanding of the issues and peculiarities of that area and how they might affect voting behaviour. The requirement to cast the interview net further than just candidates meant students were exposed to a wider range of views from voters and interest groups. This led to original news stories about electorates, arising from voices which might not otherwise have been heard during the campaign.

### **Covering candidates**

Candidates are inherently newsworthy and important to profile because they are either seeking to attain public office or attempting to achieve some other aim by standing for election. But there is another reason why UniPollWatch structured much of its coverage around profiles of candidates. Practice-based journalism courses have voracious appetites for interview subjects. Elections provide them with literally hundreds of interviewees who are, in many cases, willing to be profiled and who are topical, opinionated and operating in contested environments. This makes for an almost

symbiotic relationship, in which students can hone their reporting skills, candidates can rehearse their messages, and the public can learn more about the people who are seeking to represent them. In this way, the reporting requirements provided a valuable WIL opportunity for students practising and developing their political journalism. Notes were issued to help students research and write their candidate profiles. These made it clear that the task was to apply journalistic standards and news judgement for the voters' benefit.

Students were encouraged to dig for new information in the candidate's former public roles or businesses, as well as in their social media feeds and workplaces. They were asked to check the candidate's voting record, either in parliament or elsewhere, as well as their legal history, business directorships, club affiliations and public statements. Although devised independently, it was not unlike a list created by Al Tomkins (2003) for reporters interviewing candidates in the US. Students were also guided through some of the ethical dilemmas associated with interviewing people standing for office, including how to deal with candidates who demanded to see the stories written about them before publication and how to judge the appropriateness of asking personal questions. On these and other issues, students were advised to consult with their tutors. In almost all cases the tutors were highly experienced in dealing with such matters, based on their many years of industry experience as reporters, providing another example of the teaching-hospital approach.

*Candidate profiles*

UniPollWatch published 333 profiles of House of Representatives candidates, just over a third of those standing (Table 1). Candidates were profiled in remarkably equal numbers across the three major party groupings.

**Table 1**

*Candidate profiles per party*

Party name	Number of UPW profiles per party	Number of House of Reps Candidates	UPW coverage as a %
ALP	86	150	57
Coalition	90	161	56
Greens	86	150	57
Other	71	533	13
Total	333	994	34

There were initial fears by some on the editorial committee that students might gravitate towards Greens candidates for profiles as these candidates tend to be more willing to talk to students than candidates from other parties, and because of a perception that the Greens' policies might be more attractive to younger voters. This did not eventuate, despite it being generally true that Greens candidates were much more accessible to students than candidates from the Coalition, which comprised the Nationals, The Liberal Party, The Liberal National Party (in Queensland) and the Country Liberal Party (in the Northern Territory). This result was partly due to good editorial management (at both state and national levels), as many of the participating universities structured their coverage in order to achieve parity. Although the number of Coalition candidate profiles is marginally higher than those for the Greens and the ALP, the percentage is lower due to the fact that a greater number of candidates stood under the Coalition banner.



### *Limitations and challenges*

In a WIL environment where students were learning about politics, as much as reporting on it, it is inevitable that the site's coverage was not always sophisticated (see Wall, 2017). Throughout the website, visitors can find places where it is evident the writer was new to the field and their analysis was underdeveloped. Without singling out students' work, the mistakes could be characterised in several ways. Sometimes it was due to a lack of understanding about the political process or the nature of Australia's democratic and electoral systems, in which parties are preeminent and factions dominate everything from pre-selection to votes inside the party room. At other times it was due to a lack of appreciation of the history of things like party promises, or of a local issue, or of the effect of a national issue on a local electorate. In some instances, it was because the writer tended to believe a minor candidate who unrealistically thought they were electable in a safe Coalition seat. Mistakes were picked up at a campus level and the ensuing discussions between sub-editors and students led to deeper understanding about the nature of realpolitik. It should be noted that errors of fact were picked up and corrected. This was to a large extent thanks to the multi-layered editorial process.

There were also many benefits to public discourse, such as the hyperlocal coverage of several electorates in Western Sydney illustrated by the survey quote below. Some of these were noticed by UniPollWatch's media partner, *Guardian Australia*, and republished. By working on several electorates some universities found they were picking up trends and gauging the mood of entire regions. This is one of the great advantages of electorate-based reportage by a team of students. This occurred in Western Sydney, as one respondent said:

*Our students put the mainstream to shame because we still had bodies on the ground in every electorate while the big guns simply followed the leaders. That was why in NSW we picked up that a swing was on in western Sydney. It was a surreal experience to watch election night coverage and see the cream of the country's pundits shocked and amazed by a swing they didn't see coming. This is why university journalism has a future. We've got the bodies!!! And nobody else does.*

### **Results of students' political learning**

At its completion, the UniPollWatch editorial committee undertook a reflective process for better understanding of several aspects of the project, and to help frame future iterations of this project. Enhanced awareness and reporting skills prior and post project and strategies for ensuring articles of a publishable standard were key discussion points. Twenty-four universities, or 92.31% of the respondents, agreed with a survey question that asked: "Did the electoral model work for your university?" The most common category, to describe cohorts of students at the different institutions, was final year undergraduate students (42 per cent) and a mixture of undergraduate and postgraduate students (38 per cent). At some of the universities a combination of coursework and volunteer teams were utilised. A majority of the participating students were given the opportunity to earn course credits for the work produced for UniPollWatch and 81 per cent of the respondents identified the UniPollWatch work as one of the major assignments in their courses.

### *Students' reporting skills*

To gain an understanding of the political knowledge of the students, the campus editors were asked questions relating to what the students' awareness and skills of reporting politics were before and after the project. In spite of a large number of the students undertaking a major in politics or international relations, 88 per cent of the respondents reported that when the UniPollWatch project began most students had average or low levels of knowledge of the election process and politics in general. This included an inability to provide a basic explanation of how the election system works, naming key politicians and listing key policy areas that were anticipated to be crucial in the election.

All respondents agreed that the project in general increased the students' knowledge and interest in politics and elections. Eighty-eight per cent of respondents answered that the project helped inspire and prepare students for reporting politics, and 58 per cent thought being part of UniPollWatch made the students more critical consumers of political news.

### *Changes in student engagement*

Respondents were also asked: "Did you observe any changes in student engagement with covering political stories in the lead up to and during the campaign?" Of the 26 responses, only three editors reported no changes, while 21 reported that students became more engaged, energised or enthusiastic about covering politics over the course of the election campaign, and as stories were published. Several respondents pointed to the writing and filing of the candidate profiles as a watershed moment in the development of students as political reporters. As one said: "Once they completed the candidate profiles and participated in the editing and publication processes, they seemed more comfortable with policy-based features that followed." Another said there was "less naivety" after the student reporters had filed their first candidate profiles. From that point they had "more questioning. Greater awareness. More connection with the election, simply because they had got to know some of the players and issues". They also had "more confidence talking to and writing about politicians".

As to why the students became more politically engaged, one of the respondents offered the following explanation:

Firstly, when they knew a bit more they felt more equipped to engage with politics. At first the level of knowledge and the assumption that they didn't know enough stopped them engaging at all. And secondly, they grew to see that it wasn't something external to them – that politics deeply affected things they do care a lot about. Those that interviewed candidates became MUCH more engaged with policy when they saw it had a human face! It's worth noting that even though most engaged more with politics, this engagement wasn't always positive – in some cases, deeper understanding also came with disillusionment with the political system.

## **Discussion and Conclusions**

Overall, the survey data shows that students' general understanding of politics, and specifically the election process, increased and, in some cases greatly increased, during the project. In this way, the pedagogical aims of the study – learning skills through practice, and honing the craft of reporting – were a success, highlighting the value of this teaching hospital-style WIL project. The combination of academic and industry mentoring and supervision with real-world, hands-on learning not only helped the students understand more about political reporting, but also allowed them to work as journalists in pop-up newsrooms on a nationally important issue. This provided them with industry experience as well as the benefits of published work and enhanced employability (see Anderson et al., 2011; De Villiers Scheepers et al., 2018; Jackson, 2015; Martin et al., 2019; Wall, 2015, 2017). The survey responses also highlighted how students' knowledge grew throughout the project, allowing them to become more engaged in and understanding of the political and watchdog reporting processes, which play such key roles in news reporting, both in Australia and around the world (see Donsbach & Patterson, 2004; Hanusch et al., 2015; Tuchman, 1972). Through this WIL project, student journalists were also being moulded in the industry's image through experiential learning, which mirrored many of the approaches used in professional newsrooms (see Dodd et al., 2015; Hanusch et al., 2015). This teaching of political reporting is particularly important in the contemporary news environment, where newsroom changes have resulted in less on-the-job training

and fewer experienced mentors (see English et al., 2016; Mason, 2020; McNair et al., 2017; O'Donnell et al., 2015).

More broadly, the project also served as a springboard for further ambitious WIL collaborations by Australian and Pacific nation university journalism programs. It was instrumental in the development of the multi-university publication, [junctionjournalism.com](http://junctionjournalism.com) (*The Junction*), which is a platform for university programs across the region to showcase their work and to co-publish on common topics that include, but are not limited to, elections. As a model for training political reporters and complementing legacy media, UniPollWatch served as an attempt to contribute to national political discourse. The survey of staff overseeing the project provides a framework through which to assess the political engagement of students and the efficacy of the project's various interventions in the media.

The success or usefulness of UniPollWatch should be measured against the project's aim of providing training for student political reporters. By seeking to meet this purpose, this unique, wide-scale project strived to be both experiential and authentic, while developing a unique model of WIL, in the tradition of teaching-hospital pedagogy, and what might now be described as pop up or fluid journalism (Wall, 2015, 2017). Staff responses indicate UniPollWatch did play a beneficial, if not transformative, role for many students, by raising levels of awareness about the political process and by providing opportunities for students to meet and report on candidates during a closely contested election. However, as student responses have not been measured – at least not in a systematic way – it is hard to draw firm conclusions. This is a principal limitation of this study. While the responses from educators were predominantly positive, coming from those closely involved in the project, the survey of teaching staff was based on feedback from students provided in the hundreds of editorial meetings held across Australia during the life of the project. Therefore, the surveys provided important insights into the teaching and learning process during UniPollWatch. These reflections will be beneficial when future research is conducted into collaborative student journalism projects as a baseline for how research can be designed to capture the impact of such ventures.

Students in this project received careful mentoring and were provided with a solid foundation of knowledge about Australia's political systems. Many student reporters were exposed to challenging situations and grappled with the sorts of dilemmas that professional reporters face. We also know the project obliged student reporters to become acquainted with the same sorts of issues, information and sources as real reporters covering the same election. However, we also saw how some coverage lacked the sophistication that might be found in professional publications (see Wall, 2017), indicating that elemental knowledge was lacking and more could be done to raise levels of awareness and engagement. Evidence of its benefits and usefulness as a training tool might only become apparent in future years when the next generation of political reporters reflect on their formative moments.

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