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# Journalism And Constructive Learning: Trusting The Good Sense Of Our Students

*Constructive learning is described by some scholars as active, cumulative, goal-directed, diagnostic and reflective behaviour. This article claims that all of these behaviours are present in current journalistic education. Because there is little place in journalism practice for the learner who indulges in surface (rote) strategies, which are chosen to pass a test in many different disciplines, the journalism curriculum is unique in a sense that it rests on best pedagogical practice. These ideas are put in a philosophical context of teaching journalism as a liberal art. The introduction of the internet and online investigations are discussed as significant enhancements for the profession of journalism education.*

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## Philosophical background

Media educators know well the everyday challenges in planning and presenting a curriculum. One of the routine chores of the profession is organising and justifying course outlines for faculty committees. Out of a list that is probably exhaustive, two ideas emerge as being of paramount importance. They are: students are required to be active learners; and form and content need a correct balance.

With regard to activity, the simple adage quoted by Frederick (1989) perhaps tells it best. Reputedly from an old Lakota Indian saying, the best-known version has the formula: "Tell me, and I'll listen. Show me, and I'll understand. Involve me, and I'll learn." Everyone agrees that journalism education is involving. There remains, however, the matter of what is to be taught.

The "content" of the curriculum is always under contention. One can look to the comments of Winsbury (1994) who, when given the task of summarising the contributions of the International Institution of Communications, sought help in the famous line of the poet William Butler Yeats, "How can we know the dancer from the dance?" There is a profound paradox here which does not fit nicely within the neat administrative confines of a course description for an academic body to approve. The

etymology of the word "journalist" tells us that the content under consideration is *du jour* and could be a number of things. The journalist reports the daily news. Without going into a description of the theory of news, which is clearly beyond the scope of this article, we can simply state that news covers a variety of topics, and leave it at that.

The reality is that the dance is what the dancer does, and similarly the journalist finds, organises and delivers the news which changes in content. Today, this is a great strength for journalism education within the academy, because not only is it the natural *metier* for the discipline, but the traditional liberal arts disciplines of History, Politics, English and so forth will have to follow suit. The Nike slogan, "Just do it!" appeals to the generation of the late nineties. Leaving aside all libidinous connotations which have perennial appeal to the youthful, it captures an attitude. When there is a task to be undertaken, today's students want to get involved immediately, and are easily bored and distracted with a preliminary workup which they may consider to be too theoretical.

In an age of almost infinite access to information, the storing in one's memory of discrete bits of information is not an efficient strategy for success. The memorisation of facts, formulae, and mnemonics are skills which, while essential for learning in the Middle Ages when books were rare, and useful after the advent of the Age of Print, are seen as boring irrelevancies to a generation which expects instant response at the click of a mouse. Just as expensive inventories and storage costs are minimized in modern manufacturing by the "just in time" delivery, so in teaching and learning today, the information has to be delivered in a palatable and assimilable form just when it is required. In short, with the current generation, there seems to be less willingness to be patient than pertained with former generations. And not even a journalism educator is expected to teach patience to this generation!

The days of the fixed canon (or the standard books and authorities in a discipline such as History or Literary Criticism) may not be past, but the qualitative change brought about by the exponential change of quantity of content applicable to an area, has decreed that the day of the passive scholarly consumer, if they ever existed, are gone. Oftentimes, today, the social science student is required to write a "journalistic piece" for an educated, informed, but not necessarily specialist audience, in lieu of the usual scholarly term paper. The "specialist language" or jargon, much beloved of academics who wish to "define a field," so they can gain or retain jobs in an academic speciality, is put aside in order to ensure that their students can be checked out as being literate in the true sense

of that term. They must demonstrate they can write.

There is, of course, a body of work on journalism theory and journalism history. For example, there are branches of philosophy of great interest to the world of journalism. The active assimilation of daily knowledge and the ability to make sense of it, however, is what makes the journalist.

For the moment, nevertheless, in many places in the academy, it seems that the critics of journalism education are in the ascendancy. Perhaps a typical negative comment (Hartley, 1995:24) is that journalism schools are producing graduates whose professional status is the same as that of "real estate agents -- petty bourgeois, self-employed, white-collar workers with no commitment to professionalisation in a market which is still governed by individualistic competition and whose knowledges (sic), while requiring talent, are neither mysterious nor scarce".

Despite the critics, the students keep coming. Journalism educators are perhaps negligent in demonstrating the philosophical implications of their professional practice. More often than not, these ideas are taken for granted as being widely understood in the academy at large. That is, however, a trap for the unwary. The academy favours those who have the time to cultivate the administration, write the overview articles, take a philosophical position, and most importantly, combine with like-minded people who are willing to undertake a campaign in the channels most persuasive to academic decision-makers. While journalism educators are often most passive in academic politics, when aroused, there are few disciplines with the skills and abilities to campaign as effectively. The case study of the University of Washington (Bassett, 1995) attests to this fact.<sup>1</sup>

At a time when journalism education is attracting criticism, it seems appropriate to look for competitive advantages that journalism educators have in tertiary education. Because of the worldview, as well as the technique of journalism inculcated in our students, it is not inconceivable that a slogan for the future is, "*If you want to succeed in History, Politics, or English in the academy, study Journalism.*"

The competitive advantage that the journalism curriculum has is that it demands constructive learning, which not only gives its graduates skills enabling them to get their first job, but also equips them for a long professional life in many different areas. You cannot simultaneously have creative, self-directed constructive learners and tell them prescriptively the details of what they have to know. Because journalism demands that you find things out, and those things keep changing, it fits in nicely with this new style of educational theory in tertiary education.

## Constructive Learning And Its Attributes

Simons (1992:291) claimed that constructive learning is active, cumulative, goal-directed, diagnostic and reflective. It is active in that the student must do certain things while processing incoming information in order to learn the material in a meaningful manner. Students who construct a story from a substantial collection of press clippings, a "morgue", or some other file, and learn to write that story themselves rather than merely reading a textbook account of the same case study, are engaging in constructive learning. Using the phone, the Web, the library or human sources, the stock in trade of the journalist, demands active engagement and qualifies as constructive learning.

When it comes to learning outcomes, when journalism students write their stories for a class assignment or for a writing laboratory, they fulfil the requirements of a curriculum by following a problem-focused approach to contemporaneous issues. When students are presented with a problem to research utilising Web technology, which is a practice becoming standard across the country, they fulfil most, if not all, of the requirements of active learning. Much of the impetus for this approach can be traced at least as far back as the drive for better science education in the United States after Sputnik shattered that nation's complacency in 1957. There is, therefore, a similarity in approach with modern science education and journalism education.

One must also admit, at the outset, that these behaviours are not a sufficient condition of constructive learning. They may encourage surface learning. Just as the aforementioned Nike slogan has the drawback of not mentioning the fact that what you do is important, one has to observe the usual caveats. One utilizes a theory to justify an approach. One shouldn't adopt an approach and retrofit a concocted theory to justify what is already decided. Nevertheless, the activity factor is a necessary condition of constructive learning.

The skills and experience gained in these tasks are cumulative, in the sense that all new learning builds upon prior knowledge. In the world of work, experience is an advantage, and employers usually reward the seasoned veterans with senior positions. Some experienced reporters never aspire to anything else, retaining their curiosity and zest for new challenges until retirement. Others move on to public relations or other better-paying positions, using the experience and skills obtained in journalism to become communicators with a different mission to that of reporting the news. Journalism is goal directed. The languid process of osmosis often available to the humanities scholar, who may have to deliver a paper at the end of term, is simply not available to the student journalist who has to have copy delivered at five o'clock this afternoon.

Simons (op.cit.) claims that constructive learners are reflective, always monitoring and self-checking to see if they are reaching the goal they have set. Constructive learners are also diagnostic, in the sense that they have to be aware of the way they learn. When one is writing for the media, it is of the nature of the beast that you see if you got it right, and if you didn't then there are plenty of people who will soon inform you. Similarly, if you consistently get it wrong, and it becomes obvious there is a systematic error in the way you accumulate stories, which in educational terms means that you learn the wrong things, you will also soon be informed. Critics are legion in journalism, and everyone's work is available for all to see.

Certainly, looking for reflective material on the media, a scholar could find excellent material in the Australian Press Council News, the Press Council newsletter in which a summary of cases of complaint about the press is dealt with by a tribunal and the results published. A more vivid case study to illustrate this point is provided in a cover story of *The Bulletin* (Nicklin, 1996). The Australian Broadcasting Corporation's *Media Watch*, hosted by a lawyer, Stuart Littlemore, castigated Channel 9's *A Current Affair*'s treatment of the Paxton family of Melbourne. Littlemore began his program with: "This week I want to look at what that pack of nasty bastards at *A Current Affair* have done to three defenceless kids from the western suburbs of Melbourne...This is not journalism---it's show business."

This case study contrasts nicely with the story of the cover-up in the field of cultural anthropology where for decades the discipline protected the legendary Margaret Mead from the accusations of Derek Freeman (1996) of fudging her fieldwork. Ironically perhaps, the culture of the cultural anthropologists allowed them to withstand self-analysis within the academy.

## Journalism - Liberal Art Or Professional

The current schism between liberal and professional education is a reality in the minds of boards of studies, oversight panels and administrators generally. In its most general form, an English or History subject is "liberal arts"--a journalism subject is "professional." In truth, the holders of this view are fixated in the manner of McLuhan's "rear view mirror," driving into the future with their eyes looking into the past. With an understanding of how the best students really learn, such a distinction is of little importance, because the active learner, given the magnitude of the databases becoming available online, is required to become a master of many, formerly discrete, disciplines. It is as if the administrative philosophy considers the curriculum for medical doctors to serve in a remote area, is to prepare them to be ready to

consult the *Physician's Desk Reference* for drug dosage and contraindications. The reality is a world where remote diagnosis by specialists can be successfully made with a variety of teleconferencing techniques, including virtual reality. The medical graduate today will likely operate in a team, deal with a variety of paraprofessionals, be routinely updating the particulars of different aspects of hi-tech equipment, and adapting to cultural change which may be personally challenging. Practice must inevitably outstrip the design of the curriculum for any modern tertiary subject of a professional nature, be it medicine or journalism.

Yet employment of high technology solutions, while ever-increasing in the journalistic world, are not at the core of the issue. Rather the essential matters at issue are binding values, the challenge of changing times, and the curricular balance which is to be achieved. These issues are currently being discussed in many places, but one accessible source which is of value is the *Report of the Professional Preparation Network* at the University of Michigan, which was published under the title, *Strengthening the Ties that Bind: Integrating Undergraduate Liberal and Professional Study* (1988).

The report claimed that there were many "mythical" barriers in the academy, such as regents' policies and accreditation requirements which people only thought existed. These myths served to keep professional and liberal arts programs separated. This report is very practical and noted such "real world" situations such as the following: "Many faculty members seem discouraged by lack of incentives for interdisciplinary teaching or publishing. Visible rewards for innovative work must be established and endorsed by both faculty peers and administration." In short, the fault lies in the structure and the reward system within the academy (p 34).

This situation is exacerbated in Australia where most of the journalism programs came from a College of Advanced Education background. These institutions, amalgamated into the university system in the late eighties, had the vocational as their primary focus. At the University of Queensland, on the other hand, which has arguably the best, and certainly the oldest, journalism program in the country, undergraduate majors in a variety of disciplines, English, History, Sociology and so forth, are able to take subjects in journalism and apply them towards their courses, a practice which is standard in North America. This model should perhaps be considered for the future in more journalism programs.

Journalism subjects are intrinsically valuable to students in many disciplines. By taking on the stance of the journalist, by approaching a subject as a journalist would, that is, by having to make sense of something new, yet informed by a theoretical

overview of the communication process, and armed with the skills, motivation and energy to meet deadlines, a student in history, sociology, or any similar area will perform better. Such a student will emulate the mode of operation of a seasoned veteran rather than that of the uncertain amateur.

To reiterate the Lakota axiom, one learns best by doing, or as Biggs (1990) puts it: "Teaching is the facilitation of learning." In a keynote address to the Higher Education and Research Society of Australasia in 1990, John Biggs from the Department of Education of the University of Hong Kong, advocated the widespread adoption of constructive learning in the design of higher education curricula.

Educators have given his ideas a good reception. Because teachers realise they have to come to grips with the problems imposed by the advent of the new technologies of learning, such as the CD-ROM and the Internet, and because there are vastly increased number of students demanding service, there is a movement toward change. Biggs's main contributions are, however, philosophical and cultural. He starts with the preconceptions people in the academy have towards learning and teaching: the quantitative idea (learning is a matter of how much is learned; teaching is a transmission process), the institutional (valid learning has to be evaluated by an institution), and the qualitative (learning involves meaning, understanding, and a way of interpreting the world).

In distinguishing between deep and surface approaches to learning, Biggs defines the latter approach as focusing on quick returns, such as note-taking as a copying task. Deep strategies, on the other hand, require activities that integrate detail and high level ideation. To put his ideas in the context of journalism education, one would have to consider the case of a journalist and the task of transcription. Note-taking, for the competent journalist, would entail linking the task with previous knowledge, putting the story in context, and hypothesing what the story means for the future. (As we mentioned previously, note-taking could also mean, mere transcription without understanding, like reading an autocue without understanding, and it would then be relegated to being merely a shallow learning activity).

The discipline of journalism education can only benefit from the shift in focus away from the teacher towards the learner. Research (Ramsden, 1992) has shown that capable students can choose the modality of learning which, they expect, is most efficient in gaining success. Especially in large classes, or when resources are constrained, if they feel that rote learning and memorising are efficient (for example, for an objective test) then they memorise. If a more reflective approach is required for an



essay, then they adapt accordingly. In many disciplines, it often suits the brightest students to use surface techniques and still get high grades. That they are really cheating themselves, and losing their ability to do much better in the future, probably escapes them entirely. Because the journalism student is concerned with writing stories (which are mini-essays) to deadline, and taught to use all the tricks of using time efficiently, in order to reach an unchangeable deadline, journalism training favours constructive learning. The training empowers the student and allows the transfer of the technique to apply to any subject.

When a teacher has provided a scaffolding for them to follow, or if they make their own connections in researching an area, the classroom experience simulates the way that they will have to work in their future professional lives. It is particularly gratifying for the journalism educator when studies, such as Henningham's (1993) survey show that former students appreciate what the journalism curriculum has done for them in their professional life.

When sound educational principles which include refining the existing content of the subject in response to the student feedback, individualising the course as much as possible, providing the most up-to-date material, and using the technology appropriately are followed, the journalism subject approaches the content of any number of humanities or social science subjects. A story on interest rates, written by a specialist journalist, can qualify as being a study in economics. William L. Shirer, Winston Churchill, and Ernest Hemingway are names which come to mind as qualifying as "journalists", yet they excelled in other areas as well. The classification "journalist," then, does not allow itself easily to mutual exclusivity.

Entwistle et. al. (1992), writing in a volume devoted to designing environments for constructive learning, discussed several approaches, the first of which is the constructivist, which emphasises that knowledge and understanding has to be reconstructed within the cognitive structure of the individual learner. Because of the individualised way in which student journalists need to meet assignments, the best practice standards for present programs in journalism education also seem to encourage many different individual styles of learning, and so fulfil the requirements of this constructivist approach.

With so much attention being given to the aspect of "journalism" as "What is on today," as compared with a discipline with a discrete canon of knowledge, it must be pointed out that there are theories specific to journalism, and communication in

## Journalistic Theories

general: agenda setting, spiral of silence, knowledge gaps, and the various uses and gratification approaches to name a few.

The main task of the journalism educator using constructive learning techniques is to draw to the attention of the learners the latest thinking in the field, and to point out appropriate case studies which would be valuable to the student. It is also imperative to give some sense of what has been accomplished in the past, a very real problem when administrators cull book lists by the date of publication. (If it is old, it must be bad).

While one might take a classic study which appears in many forms, in texts, scholarly journals, or collections of readings as being vital to the background knowledge of the student, one also has the duty to show how the basic principles are still relevant at the present time. For example, Jay Jensen's *Liberalism, Democracy and the Mass Media* from the Institute of Communication Research at the University of Illinois bears the dates of printing 1959, 1974 and 1976. It also has, in the bibliography, Fred Siebert's and colleagues' *Four Theories of the Press* (1956).

While there have been many variations on the theme in the past thirty years, when one looks at the third edition of Denis McQuail's *Mass Communication Theory* (1994) under "normative theories" one still will find "Libertarian Theory" and "Authoritarian Theory" (pp. 128-129). Using Occam's razor that "beings should not be multiplied without necessity" as a philosophical maxim to follow, one can use these ideas to explain a modern journalist's vision of the future in Hong Kong in 1997. While today, there may be five theories of the press, and McQuail's compilation of theories grows with each successive edition, when one wants to explain a current study regarding press freedom, the study has to go back to John Stuart Mill.

Considering a current empirical study by Joseph Man Chan, Paul Lee and Chin-Chuan Lee (1996), *Hong Kong Journalists in Transition*, one seems to have to fall back on the seminal work of Siebert, Jensen, and indeed the remarkable think-tank that existed at the University of Illinois in the fifties. Chan and his colleagues completed an empirical study surveying journalists' opinions of the perceptions of Hong Kong's political future (pp.110 -121). Using Occam's dictum, one need not venture far from interpreting the data in the light of the authoritarian and libertarian principles. (Of course, by the American first amendment to the constitution standards, British ideas of press freedom, let alone their colonial practice, leave much to be desired).

While on the theme of the public opinion and political outspokenness in pre-1997 Hong Kong, a study by Lars Willnat (1995) provides an excellent example of the testing of a journalistic theory and a type of case study the teacher should bring to the

constructive learner. Building on the classic Noelle-Neumann's studies of the spiral of silence effect in Germany, Willnat explored the likelihood of outspokenness in light of what the speaker thought of the amount of support that might be forthcoming. The issue was the Governor's democratisation policy. The telephone respondents were asked such questions as if they would give their opinions at a dinner table with people they knew, or on a phone-in talk show program. Two opinion perception measures were created to represent the congruence between one's own opinion and one's perceived current and future majority opinion. Upon analysis, respondents in the surveys were more willing to voice their opinions publicly when they perceived the majority opinion to be on their side, just as the theory predicted.

At a time, when, as Henningham (1996, 22) states, Australian communication and media studies departments are sceptical of empirical approaches, it is important to present the best empirical studies to journalism students' attention. If they learn constructively, they will see their worth.

It is essentially an act of trust in the good sense of our students.

## Notes

1. One of the most dramatic recent case studies in the administration of communication education was the challenge to the School of Communication at the University of Washington (Bassett, 1995). When the budget axe was threatened to this leading program, a thorough examination of its worth occurred. The School mounted a vigorous campaign, and, when the examination was over, the school's editorial journalism, media studies, and graduate program remained intact.

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