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Reporting Refugees: a case study in interdisciplinary research-led experiential learning

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Reporting Refugees: a case study in interdisciplinary research-led experiential learning

Abstract

Inflammatory Australian media coverage of refugees and asylum seekers – an utterly marginalised subset of those from culturally and linguistically diverse communities portrayed as "mad, bad, sad or other" (Phillips & Tapsall 2007a, 2007b; Phillips 2009; Phillips 2011) - is frequently blamed for entrenched bigotry against these groups (Posetti 2007, 2009, 2010; Ewart & Posetti 2010; McKay, Thomas & Blood 2011).

How should journalism educators respond to this problem? And how should they respond in the context of an increasingly converged and social media-engaged industry, with a research objective?

At the University of Canberra (where the lead author taught broadcast and social journalism from 2003-2012) final year broadcast journalism students were partnered with the region's peak refugee agency, Canberra Refugee Support (CRS), the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, students at The Australian National University's School of Music (who composed original music to score the stories under the supervision of the secondary author (who then taught Music at ANU) and the e-democracy portal OurSay. This was a public journalism (Rosen 1999, Gillmor 2004) project updated for the Social Media Age, with an emphasis on student reporters facilitating community engagement, participating in crowdsourcing and content amplification via Twitter, Facebook and blogs (C.f discussion of investigative social journalism practices and principles in Posetti 2013). The project became known by its Twitter hashtag #ReportingRefugees.

This paper will discuss the project's creative outputs, present the findings of a content analysis of fifty-two reflective practice blogs produced by the journalism students involved, and consider the reflections of project partners in the context of implications for future collaborative projects developed in accordance with this model.

Keywords

led, research, interdisciplinary, study, case, learning, refugees, experiential, reporting

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Reporting Refugees: A case study in interdisciplinary research-led experiential learning.

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"Knowing a few refugees now, this is not just a word to me anymore. When I hear the word REFUGEE mentioned, I think about the people I talked to during this project and I can see their faces." Journalism student who worked on the Reporting Refugees project (Posetti 2012)

Introduction

Inflammatory Australian media coverage of refugees and asylum seekers – an utterly marginalised subset of those from culturally and linguistically diverse communities portrayed as "mad, bad, sad or other" (Phillips & Tapsall 2007a, 2007b; Phillips 2009; Phillips 2011) - is frequently blamed for entrenched bigotry against these groups (Posetti 2007, 2009, 2010; Ewart & Posetti 2010; McKay, Thomas & Blood 2011).

How should journalism educators respond to this problem? And how should they respond in the context of an increasingly converged and social media-engaged industry, with a research objective?

At the University of Canberra (where the lead author taught broadcast and social journalism from 2003-2012) final year broadcast journalism students were partnered with the region's peak refugee agency, Canberra Refugee Support (CRS), the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, students at The Australian National University's School of Music (who composed original music to score the stories under the supervision of the secondary author (who then taught Music at ANU) and the e-democracy portal OurSay. This was a public journalism (Rosen 1999, Gillmor 2004) project updated for the Social Media Age, with an emphasis on student reporters facilitating community engagement, participating in crowdsourcing and content amplification via Twitter, Facebook and blogs (C.f discussion of investigative social journalism practices and principles in Posetti 2013). The project became known by its Twitter hashtag #ReportingRefugees.

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Australian Political and Media Context

For the past 15 years, racist and xenophobic political memes have dominated public discussion of refugees and asylum seekers in Australia, with asylum seekers who arrive by boat demonised as threatening aliens by politicians whose

divisive messages (C.f. this Youtube clip from Australia's Opposition Leader, Tony Abbott <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XjDWbFm7S08&feature=relmfu>) are fanned and fed by inflammatory headlines and tabloid TV (SBS 2011)



The Hussaini family -- Hazara refugees, who now live in Canberra, Australia, featured in the ABC radio program produced by the Reporting Refugees project. Picture by Tim Anger

In this climate, and on the back of involvement in a substantial national research project on the reporting of multiculturalism funded by the Australian Government in response to problematic and inflammatory reporting of multicultural communities (Journalism in Multicultural Australia/Reporting Diversity 2006-2009), in 2011 the lead author decided to embark on a public journalism project with her final-year students as an intervention in the observable crisis of racist, bigoted and xenophobic public discourse. Theories influencing this intervention include Peace Journalism (C.f. Shaw, Lynch & Hacket 2012), Activist Journalism (C.f. Wall 2003), Development Journalism (C.f. Ogan 1980) and Advocacy Journalism (C.f. Hammon 2002) and the lead author's developing theories regarding the potential transformative impact of journalists' encounters with minority groups (C.f. Posetti 2007, 2008, 2010)

The end result was a two-hour ABC radio program and multimedia publication (ABC 2011) that gave a much-needed voice to refugees and opportunities for self-representation, a better understanding for the public of the complicated issues surrounding asylum seekers and refugees, and important lessons for those students, academics and media professionals who worked on the project.

Background: Project Structure

#ReportingRefugees aimed to: model best practice journalism on coverage of vulnerable minorities; provide an opportunity for Work-Integrated Learning;

build community around the content by implementing a co-ordinated social media strategy; and generate agenda-setting public journalism research. This was a multi-disciplinary research-led project, drawing on Journalism Studies, Cultural Studies, Radio Studies, Audience Studies and theories of pedagogy surrounding professional learning and communities of practice. It served as a case study in experiential professional education, designed to empower marginalised peoples and develop cultural intelligence within a cohort of future journalists and musicians through encounter and collaboration.

The project required journalism students to work in pairs on the production of (assessable) audio/video feature stories, in collaboration with music students whose task was to score the stories during production. The individual stories produced were considered for broadcast during a two-hour ABC Local Radio program dedicated to the project. The program was presented and co-produced by journalism students who occupied key roles in the final production phase, including: presenters; feature interviewers; producers; web producers and production assistants. The ABC's website also published multimedia versions of the students' stories and an exemplar story produced by their tutors. The musicians' work was included in a portfolio of compositions assessed as part of their music theory curriculum.

The major journalism assessment required students to work in reporting duos on original, long-form audio or video-driven stories about refugees-asylum seekers (or policies and programs pertaining to them) that would compete for selection in the final radio program. Additionally, they had to produce images and text to accompany their stories for online publication. They were encouraged to speak with, not just about, refugees and asylum seekers and to explore personal stories and angles that the media had largely overlooked. Some reporting duos were assigned to refugee/asylum seeker families and community services facilitated by CRS, while others independently identified stories and sources. This approach was editorially and structurally necessary but it did pose some challenges vis assessment equity issues because some students felt disadvantaged as a result of not having easy access to sources.

The journalism students' audio/multimedia features were marked in accordance with traditional professional journalism standards (e.g. writing; production values; audio, video, image, editing quality; news value; narrative structure). However, an element of student-journalist peer review was also incorporated into the assessment process, with students scoring their assignment partners on teamwork, as a means of ensuring transparency regarding work distribution within reporting duos. The stories were then subjected to a professional, competitive editorial selection process, with the ABC's Program Director determining the final line-up for broadcast and web publication after an initial selection process undertaken by the journalism students' tutors (including the lead author), all of whom were experienced ABC broadcast journalists.

The community partnership with Canberra Refugee Support was integral in facilitating story participants from the refugee and asylum seeker communities, and in assisting with the sensitisation of journalism students to the issues

involved in interviewing traumatised people. But one of the most innovative aspects of the project was the partnership with crowdsourcing start-up OurSay. The OurSay website (Project URL: <http://oursay.org/reporting-refugees>) was used to generate questions sourced from the wider community about refugee and asylum seeker issues, which were voted upon by the public, with the top five questions being put to a panel of experts for discussion during a panel incorporated into the two hour ABC Radio program broadcast on November 27th on the network's national capital station known as *ABC 666 Canberra*.

Thus, in terms of both modes of learning and the integration with industry partners, the project was explicitly set up as an authentic learning environment for students. "Authentic learning environments have their foundations in situated approaches to learning which advocate that learning is best achieved in circumstances that resemble the real life application of knowledge." (Herrington and Herrington 2006)

An additional assessment item required the journalism students to produce individual Twitter streams, which involved the assessment of audience engagement and micro-blogging skills, to assist development of experience in the area of building communities of interest around journalistic content (Posetti 2013). They were also encouraged to use Facebook groups to manage their projects and liaise with ANU School of Music students involved in the scoring of their stories.

Further, in the interests of developing transparent professional practice, the students were required to publish academically-grounded, individual reflective-practice blog posts. They were asked to critically analyse the project, their involvement in it and their experiences of it, with reference to their own attitudes towards asylum seekers and refugees. This process allowed the students' academic supervisors to gather data enabling scholarly assessment of the pedagogical impact of the #ReportingRefugees project.

Anatomy of #ReportingRefugees Partnerships

The first approach in developing the partnerships that underpinned the #ReportingRefugees project was made by the lead author to Canberra Refugee Support. Their initial response reflected the impact of xenophobic political campaigns and media stereotyping: they were reluctant to get involved. But meetings were pursued, with emphasis placed on arguments about the merits of interventions in journalism education and public journalism approaches in tackling problematic reporting of marginalised communities. The proposal was for Canberra Refugee Support to facilitate contact between student journalists and asylum seeker-refugee clients and provide advice on relevant policy and community programs, with the aim of minimising any potential harm to vulnerable interviewees and assisting in the development of culturally intelligent reporting on a complex and often poorly reported issue.

Ultimately, CRS agreed to participate. "The judgment of the CRS board was that the potential return on this project far outweighed the risks and (we) decided to

proceed," McPherson told the lead author, reflecting on the project at its conclusion (Posetti 2012)

By contrast, the ABC was keen to be involved from the outset. They were even prepared to hand over two hours of airtime to the students, allowing them (under joint ABC & academic supervision) to report, produce and present a radio special devoted to #ReportingRefugees which was scheduled for broadcast three months from the start of the project.

Jordie Kilby, *ABC 666 Canberra* content director, explained the ABC's motivation for involvement: "We hoped for an insightful look at the local community of refugees living in the Canberra region; we wanted to build on our relationships with local refugees and asylum seekers and the community groups that help and support them. We also hoped the project would give us an opportunity to look at some future journalists and their ideas and work." (Posetti 2012)

By this stage, the Australian National University's School of Music project collaborator (co-author [Jonathan Powles](#)) had agreed to offer his students the opportunity to produce original scores to accompany the lead author's journalism students' stories. Apart from being an interesting, cross-disciplinary education collaboration, the provision of original music for the planned radio program meant that the ABC would also be able to podcast the show. (Copyright laws in Australia prevent the podcasting of commercial music broadcast on radio.)

Finally, the lead author approached OurSay -- a Melbourne startup which partners with media organisations, universities and NGOs to crowdsource (Bradshaw 2009) questions designed to address the "citizens' agenda." They jumped at the chance to be involved, and the #ReportingRefugees [OurSay page](#) was launched. The public was asked to identify the questions they most wanted answered by a panel of experts on asylum seeker-refugee policy during the ABC broadcast.

OurSay's CEO, Eyal Halamish, explained the role of the platform in the project: "Especially on such a contentious issue as that of refugees and asylum seekers, where the mainstream media latch onto sensationalist, short-termist news instead of taking a broader view, a social tool such as OurSay can help set the agenda more effectively and help express what the public feels about an issue, as sourced from their own questions and comments." (Posetti 2012) It worked like this: Over the course of a month, OurSay users were asked to submit the questions they most wanted put to the panel, and the top five questions were selected by popular vote on the site two weeks before the date of the broadcast.

Pedagogical Outcomes

Trying to balance journalism learning outcomes and university assessment policies against real-world media deadlines is always challenging. But doing so on a project seeking to break new ground, through multiple public journalism partnerships, on a complex and sensitive reporting assignment, proved to be an

extremely challenging teaching experience. Fortunately, it also emerged as a very enriching and rewarding experiment in journalism pedagogy, as the journalism student-identified learning outcomes revealed.

A content analysis of 52 reflective practice blog posts published by the University of Canberra journalism students involved in the project demonstrated the following outcomes:

- *Increased awareness of refugee and asylum seeker issues and facts
- *Increased sensitivity towards minorities and vulnerable people in the context of field reporting
- *Increased capacity for critical analysis of media outputs
- *Increased awareness of the importance of factual reporting
- *Significant transformations of attitudes to refugees and asylum seekers among some students
- *Improved audio craft skills developed through ABC mentoring
- *Great professional satisfaction and increased confidence among the students whose stories were selected for broadcast or online publication by the ABC.
- *Some difficulty with the complexity of the project – particularly as regards co-ordination of engagement with music composition students at the other institution.
- *Increased capacity for acts of transparent journalism and reflective practice.
- *Increased social media literacy.
- *Engagement with ethical issues that arise through partnerships with community organisations on public journalism projects.
- * Limitations with regards to cross-institutional, cross-disciplinary student collaborations where only one cohort of students' work is subject to assessment.

Many of the journalism students involved in the project admitted in their reflective practice blog posts that they were daunted by the theme and the workload when they first heard about it.

One, Ewan Gilbert, conceded that he was initially a tad perplexed: "I went into the assignment thinking it was all a bit over the top." But Gilbert, now a cadet journalist with the ABC, clearly understood the project's purpose in retrospect: "I think one of the biggest barriers people face when it comes to understanding refugee issues, is that most Australians have probably never met one," he blogged (Posetti 2012). "Putting a face to an issue was so important to helping

my understanding of the problems. You learn to treat the issue with humanity. You learn to see refugees as people and quite often extremely vulnerable people at that. If the whole refugee debate didn't have any relevancy to me before, it certainly does now."

This trajectory from initial hesitation to eventually embrace the complex and messy realities of professionally-situated learning has been well-described theoretically. For instance, Lave (1991:69) writes "The process of becoming a full practitioner through increasingly intense, interconnected, and 'knowledgeably-skilled' participation, on the one hand, and the organization of processes of work, on the other hand, do not generally coincide at levels at which activity is intentionally organized. It follows that learners' perspectives on work will be different, and their comprehension of the practice will change across the process of learning." In many ways, the trajectory of students involved in this project betrayed this disjunction, adapting their work practices to the demands of the professional environment as the professional demands and deadlines were required to be met. Arguably, this trajectory was more successfully negotiated by the journalism students than the music students. A significant number of the latter group refused to change their work patterns to respond to the authentic complexities of the professional learning environment. But such 'on-the-job' learning experiences are typical of journalism education.

Another journalism student, Grace Keyworth, who was already working in the Canberra Press Gallery as a part-time videographer with Australian Associated Press when the project began, wrote that #ReportingRefugees was an important and timely intervention.

"I have been present at countless press conferences this year where the discussion of asylum seekers and refugees was completely dehumanized. There was a lot of talk of numbers, figures and 'processing' them like they're a piece of meat, but hardly any of names, occupations or their reasons for leaving their countries," she lamented. "It shows that as a society, we haven't progressed beyond the racial." (Posetti 2012)

This quote from journalism student Linn Loken, sums up the value of the project and makes her teacher's and editorial mentors' substantial investment in time, energy and effort in its execution seem worthwhile:

"Knowing a few refugees now, this is not just a word to me anymore. When I hear the word REFUGEE mentioned, I think about the people I talked to during this project and I can see their faces," she blogged (Posetti 2012)

Out of 52 blog posts, while several students criticised elements of the project's logistics (such as the complexity of the project and the difficulties encountered with co-ordinating the music scoring of stories), only one student was critical of the project's motivation. She viewed the project as politicised and felt excluded because her own views were more in line with those political and tabloid media perspectives being criticized by most of the protagonists in the #ReportingRefugees stories being produced.

It should be noted that the authors acknowledge the possibility that the journalism students may have been reluctant to criticise the central values of the project in a public blog post. Nevertheless, anonymous University of Canberra student feedback forms (which can't be quoted due to ethics clearance concerns about publishing the data), completed by journalism students enrolled in the subject which anchored the project, also revealed that only one student expressed dissatisfaction with the project's goals.

DISCUSSION OF MUSIC STUDENTS' INVOLVEMENT.

A dozen music students from ANU School of Music contributed to the project as part of an optional, assessable element of their music composition/music theory curriculum. Initially, twice this number of students expressed an interest in pursuing this option. However, in the end the complexities of the task, mirroring real-world professional collaboration, proved to be an unanticipated feature for students whose previous experience of formal composition had been through highly structured and scaffolded exercises.

This tension mirrored the emerging tension in music curricula more generally, between the traditional/artistic and the contemporary/applied. Structuring an authentic and technologically-enhanced learning environment for musical composition has proven successful in recent initiatives to bridge this divide (C.f. Savage & Challis, 2002)

The process for engaging between the two student cohorts was primarily mediated through the Facebook sites created for the #ReportingRefugees project as a whole, and a subsidiary site created just for collaboration on the music scores. UC journalism students posted their story ideas and then, later, the rough-cut versions of their segments for the ANU music students to use as a basis for their compositions. The journalism students also, in many cases, indicated a preference as to musical style, length, and mood.

This latter element – which very accurately captures the reality of media collaboration – proved quite confronting for several of the music students, in some cases even leading to their withdrawal from the project. In the main, the composition curriculum followed by the students had encouraged aesthetic autonomy and an overarching value-set that held “artistic quality” – however defined – as the ultimate criterion that shaped compositional decisions. In the #reportingrefugees project, this criterion was overturned in favour of “fitness for purpose”: how well did the music composed suit the needs of reinforcing the transmission of the journalistic message?

In some cases, the journalism students intervened editorially in the musical decision-making. For instance, the individual music students' emotional musical responses to the refugees' stories was almost always melancholy, if not tragic: this led to a mass of music that was slow, reflective, quiet and sad. This did not suit the pacing needs for the program as a whole, which required musical punctuation that created more variety, and emotionally mapped many of the refugees' trajectories from desolation to optimism.

The complex and authentic nature of these requirements was of enormous value to the music students, even if it engendered a high attrition rate for this particular option. A small number of students relished the opportunity to engage in this way, producing scores for up to half-a-dozen of the journalism students' reports. The most significant learning outcomes for the music students were not concerning the craft of music composition but in fact in navigating the professional expectations surrounding the collaboration.

This last fact raised some issues for assessment. Ultimately, a double set of criteria needed to be invoked. Compositions of great technical and artistic merit needed to be rewarded as such, against an assumed value-set that stood implicitly in place at an institution that is predicated on the creation and performance of art music. However, another set of criteria needed to be explicitly invoked to reward students who had engaged directly with the requirement to meet the journalistic needs of the stories and their authors. In practice, both these sets of criteria were invoked, with the benefit of the doubt being given to the student.

CONCLUSION

The #ReportingRefugees project was a timely intervention in problematic reporting of a heavily marginalised Australian social group – refugees and asylum seekers.

It presented complex structural, professional and pedagogical issues that required thoughtful and flexible navigation. It also posed logistical problems with regards assessment and collaboration between students from different disciplines and institutions.

However, those difficulties proved navigable and ultimately gave way to a powerful radio program based on an experiential-learning, public journalism-informed, industry-partnered reporting project. One that's worth repeating – albeit with augmentation to effect more effective cross disciplinary collaboration – as an intervention in problematic reporting of a range of issues and communities.

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