NEWSPACE: A place, not just a platform, for a critical pedagogy of journalism

John Harrison, Martin Hirst & Michael de Wall
School of Journalism and Communication
The University of Queensland

Abstract

The traditional approach to curriculum development in journalism practice has been the simulation model. Identify what ‘real’ newsrooms do and emulate it. The approach presented here both inverts and subverts this tradition and starts with a theoretical model which is then applied to journalism practice. In this paper, building on Michael de Wall’s earlier articulation of Freirean critical pedagogy, we configure a curriculum which accounts for new and emerging technologies, while attempting to short circuit the disconnections of a techno-centric reality that is primarily virtual, by creating an authentic learning community.

Introduction

Much of the growing literature on media convergence in the journalism classroom is simply descriptive of the convergent news production process and the technologies applied in training journalism students in that process. (Cokley & Eeles 2003; Bardoel 2001; Tickle 2002; Calendar 2003; Mohl 2002; South & Nicholsen 2002; Huesca 2000; Isaacs 1999; Outing 1999; Glenn 1996). Rarely is a reflective pedagogy articulated. Michael de Wall’s earlier paper sets out the way the Freireian tradition of critical pedagogy provides the intellectual foundations for the approach to the teaching of convergent newsroom practices we are adopting at the University of Queensland. de Wall’s articulation of Freire means that a ‘convergent newsroom’ is not simply a technological platform fitted out with the best equipment a cash-strapped university can provide, but rather is a place of critical and reflective engagement with the news agenda. While cognisant of the technological imperatives, our approach is grounded in a social constructivist view of the world. We have named the venue in which de Wall’s approach is applied as NEWSPACE. This paper outlines how we see de Wall’s approach being operationalised in the School of Journalism & Communication at The University of Queensland, how it relates to the public relations curriculum, also taught within the School, and how it can enhance both the first year experience, and act as a venue for research.

NEWSPACE™ Operations

In applying a critical pedagogy approach, and cognisant that Freire rejected the reductionist methodologisation of his techniques, (Freire and Macedo 1998: 6-7), we propose that the current convergent newsroom complex will become a full-time teaching laboratory which creates the School’s publishing and broadcast outputs. The School’s Journalist-in-Residence becomes editor-in-chief and plays a key role in leading, and supervising the operations of the NEWSPACE.
Senior staffing in the NEWSPACE on a daily basis is by suitably-skilled postgraduate students and journalists on secondment to the School\(^1\), acting in supervisory and teaching roles in the newsroom on a roster. Student mentors (employed as Production Demonstrators) do hands-on training and editorial supervision. The mentors will also support socialisation visits to the NEWSPACE by first year cohorts.

**Figure 1. NEWSPACE ORGANISATIONAL CHART**

Within NEWSPACE, students are divided into cohorts of roughly equal numbers, and each cohort completes a series of modules designed to deliver reflective professional practice. The production model involves all students in aspects of production for the various publications, broadcasts and platforms supported by NEWSPACE. Student cohorts operate along the following editorial lines:

- Second year undergraduates undertake news-gathering and reporting tasks, under the supervision of Editorial Tutors and Production Demonstrators.
- Third year undergraduates work on more complex material (features; current affairs), again under supervision.
- Honours students and appropriate post-graduates operate in senior editorial roles, which report to senior staff and to the Editor-in-Chief.
- Second and third year production courses are replaced with workshops and an internship in the integrated newsroom.

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\(^1\) We are proposing that a series of ‘visiting fellow’ positions be created and made available to working journalists who would like to experience the ‘integrated newsroom’ concept. This would provide avenues for industry partnerships in research and scholarship.
• Each cohort rotates through a series of newly-designed learning modules (based on current teaching strengths) over a three semester year.²

• Staff co-teach across the whole year (a smaller number of lectures), but only teach in two semesters per calendar year, thus allowing more time for concentrated periods of research.

• Students can complete placements in each editorial section and across all media, or can specialise.

• Practical assessment is through the NEWSPACE: formative assessment is provided by peer review, summative assessment is through submission of published and broadcast work and reflective self-assessment (a professional portfolio of effort and achievement).

First year students will be encouraged to participate in the space in an informal way, as well as having specified periods of observation and structured work experience and support roles, perhaps something akin to the traditional role of youngsters in the print newsroom: as copy assistants.

NEWSPACE: Sustainable, Integrated Production Outputs of Quality

The integrated production platform provided by digital multi-media hardware and infrastructure are features of convergent technologies that allow for both cost-savings and curriculum integration in journalism. The key to optimising sustainability in terms of resources, infrastructure, funding, and consistency of output is consideration of a full-year rotation of semesters.

The School is already involved with integrated models of teaching, learning and media production, and it is an emerging research strength within the disciplines of journalism and communication. Convergence allows for content to be produced, packaged and shared across platforms. It also allows the School to integrate editorial functions across all media, which are currently taught in a silo fashion, rather than in collaborative and sequential modules. Integration will allow the School to continue both research and media outputs in the following formats:

• Online news: A continuous presence online through daily updates in text, audio and video, with webcam newscasting options through video streaming.

• Radio: a variety of community radio outlets, 4RPH, 4ZZZ, 4AAA, along with internet based broadcasting options.

• Television: News & Caff packages for community television, and online webcasting.

• Print: The Queensland Independent print and online editions.

• News, comment and opinion via a subscription-based News Wire service on the web for regional and suburban throwaways, as well as the plethora of interest group publications, sustained on a pay per article basis.

² We are convinced that a full-year teaching and production model would be more sustainable and a better use of the University’s resources than the current two semester plus an intensive yet still informal summer semester. This issue needs further discussion and clarification and all the industrial issues must be covered off prior to implementation.
NEWSPACE and COMSPACE

The possible contamination of journalism students with the contagion of public relations (now included under the rubric of “public communication” at UTS) is probably the greatest cause of moral panic among journalism educators (Breen 1996). Yet the critical pedagogy approach critiques not only journalism, but also public relations. The counter-part of NEWSPACE is COMSPACE where the critical pedagogy approach is applied equally vigourously to teaching and learning about public relations, so that media releases, VNRs, and web content, promotional publications, fundraising and event management all contribute to community development, and the creation and maintenance of social capital. Thus both NEWSPACE and COMSPACE are working exemplars of reflective practice.

In the approach we are developing at The University of Queensland, NEWSPACE and COMSPACE are each initially located on a different campus: NEWSPACE at St Lucia, and COMSPACE at Ipswich, but the infrastructure platforms are identical, and both laboratories are joined by LAN, microwave links and, in the future, fibre-optic cable. The pedagogical approach is also identical; while applications of the model are different, nor are the genres of content produced necessarily identical. There is a world of difference between a news story on road safety produced for community television, and a social marketing video promoting road safety.

First Year Experience

The need to reduce undergraduate attrition rates through effective socialisation to university learning has been driving a focus on “the first year experience” (FYE) for some time, as reflected in the growing volume of research literature on the issue (Swing 2001, Koch 2001).

As Cutright (2002) found, research intensive universities do not have the best reputation when it comes to the first-year student experience. Clustering (Crissman 2001; Logan, Salisbury and Spence 2000) and the notion of creating learning communities (Eckel 1994; Tinto and Goodsell 1994) which intentionally embrace undergraduate, postgraduate, and academic staff, are central to the achievement of stated learning outcomes and higher levels of graduate satisfaction. Peer leadership (Quintrell and Westwood 1993) and what Hamid (2001) terms “student paraprofessionals” have an important part to play in an effective FYE program. NEWSPACE builds on this notion of peer leadership by also including active industry practitioners as journalists-in-residence. The effective use of laboratory based student experience as part of an intentional strategy of student retention is first recorded in the literature nearly twenty years ago (Brownell and Watson 1984). For undergraduates in journalism and communication, NEWSPACE and COMSPACE provide an alternative venue – even if only as observers – to what one of our colleagues – unconscious of any possible contradiction - characterised as the “exciting chalk and talk” of large, first year classes in cavernous lecture theatres.

Research infrastructure

Finally, both NEWSPACE and COMSPACE provide sites for research into sustainable models of community news and information service production, and a
training venue for postgraduate research students. Issues of social capital creation, social entrepreneurship, governance and ethics –indeed the broader social implications of emerging community owned digital platforms - are significantly under-researched in the Australian context. As Coates (2000) has argued:

Local relationship and local relevance has long been upheld as one of community broadcasting’s major strengths. Yet, while undoubtedly essentially local, it is increasingly true that its ability to serve and represent local community interest is being compromised through economic pressures. At the same time issues of the local and global juxtaposition are on the horizon as stations begin to make greater use of Internet based communications for collecting program content.

Forde et al. (2001) suggest that in the community radio sector, core funding is below 1985 levels in real terms and they conclude that “concerns about under-funding and under-resourcing are generally acknowledged and frequently bemoaned throughout the industry”. From the recent international literature, it is clear that while some attention has been paid to television, most studies have focused on radio, and while community media have been extensively and soundly theorised, particularly in Europe (Servaes 2003), Rennie (2001) is the only Australian research to have examined community television in detail.

On community television, Rennie reports that “the stations have not had sufficient regulatory framework to protect them from commercial interests or to enable them to enter in to long-term funding and programming arrangements” (p.8). Rennie has also analysed some of the problems associated with migrating community television to the digital spectrum from 2006 onwards. According to Rennie’s review the sector was not given the chance to establish a “permanent place within the nation’s mediascape” (p.6). While the sector is run on not-for-profit lines, the financial realities of production (studios, transmission, management) and restrictions on potential income-streams has meant that the individual stations and the whole sector have remained poor and under-resourced. The existing broadcasters tend to operate on vastly different business models and income streams. Rennie argues that expecting the stations to be successful, to operate as a “coordinated collective of efficient stations would have been unrealistic” (p.8). Unlike other community sectors, broadcasting has received very little in the way of government financial support.

Rennie indicates that the current situation requires urgent responses to a number of questions:

For Australian community television, the reality is that there are many challenges within the analogue broadcasting environment that have not yet been met. Issues such as funding arrangements, national coordination and program distribution, as well as management structures and access models must be, at some level, addressed by the sector (p.11).

Thus NEWSPACE and COMSPACE serve as venues for a research agenda which has significance for:

- ongoing policy development in broadcasting and communication policy in the federal arena including, the rollout of broadband, digital television, the new information economy, the digital divide, rural and regional community engagement and media service provision, as well as the issues
of ownership and convergence and the disposition of funds from the proposed Telstra sale.

- state and local governments seeking competitive advantages in new media, such as Queensland’s ‘Smart State’ initiative and Brisbane City Council’s ourbrisbane.com.
- the interaction between community interest groups and community media organisations, as they work through the provision of sustainable infrastructure which enables media access by under-represented and marginalised groups, as well as groups disadvantaged by existing media frames, in ways which also contribute to the creation of social capital. This last mentioned agenda is an emerging research theme in the School (Tannock 2002; Castillo & Hirst 2001).

Central to the resourcing of both research and teaching in NEWSPACE and COMSPACE are two recently funded infrastructure facilities: one cross faculty and one cross-institutional. Psychologists, political and social scientists and communication scholars within the University have collaborated on the development of an Integrated Focus Group & Media Research Facility located with the School of Journalism and Communication’s precinct at St Lucia campus which creates, among other things, the possibility of real time analysis of focus groups, and for machine aided mapping and interpretation of newsroom ethnographies. The Australian Creative Resource Archive is located at the UQ Ipswich campus and involves scholars from three Australian universities in the creation of a digital storage archive or “media junkyard” which will collect material in a variety of file formats – principally text, sound, still and moving pictures - and make these available under a variety of low cost IP regimes. The significance of this archive for research and media production in NEWSPACE and COMSPACE is inestimable.

**Conclusion**

The NEWSPACE and COMSPACE platforms acknowledge the related yet different disciplinary orientations of journalism and communication studies. In de Wall’s terms, the overarching function of each laboratory is to engage:

- **Emotional Attitude** - the development of an “emotional attitude” through ongoing critical-reflective practice,
- **Power Awareness** - the cultivation of “power awareness” through background research,
- **Critical Engagement** - “Learning together and making meaning” through field research,
- **Knowledge Production** - “Constructing and representing experience” through media production,

Projects that embrace the spirit of this approach include the Transnational Working Communities Project – California (Bacon, 2003) and the Community Media Workshop – Chicago (CMW, 2003). As with Australia’s major metropolitan centres, the story of Chicago is the “tale of two-cities” in which the media favours the centre over the suburban margins. By adopting a community approach to the problem, CMW trains people “to tell their stories to the media, tips sensitive journalists to the
importance of these stories, and tries to create better relationships between the media and the diverse communities which make up Chicago” (CMW, 2003). Castillo and Hirst (2001) have outlined similar problems in Sydney’s western suburbs and suggested a pedagogic solution involving greater community-journalist interaction on story development and source selection. Anne Tannock’s PhD work on news ‘black spots’ in non-metropolitan Queensland complements this approach, as does an exciting new project, the Redcliffe Youth Magazine, which we are currently assessing through an action research plan.

NEWSPACE, and its counterpart COMSPACE, thus bring to life the praxis of research, teaching and community service described earlier by de Wall. Yes, technological convergence is recognised as the platform, but the genuine, authentic convergence is that of research, teaching and community service in a learning community.

REFERENCES:


