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A new initiative: Student journalists learn about Aboriginal communities and culture in Western Australia

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Abstract

This paper reports on a new initiative between the Combined Universities Centre for Rural Health (CUCRH) and the journalism program at Edith Cowan University (ECU). The main aim is to help journalism students achieve a better understanding of Aboriginal communities and culture in Western Australia, and that this new knowledge and experience will inform student news stories and feature articles on Aboriginal issues. Currently, non-Aboriginal journalists seldom get to meet and talk with Aboriginal people about their life and beliefs, and this often results in narrow and misinformed reporting. So in July 2008, eight final-year ECU journalism students were offered an opportunity by CUCRH to participate in a one-month journalism placement with Aboriginal communities in two Western Australian towns. At the end of the placement, the students were asked to prepare a brief written report on what they had learnt from the experience. A common response was that the students had gained substantial knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal people (and about themselves). The prime focus of the paper is on what the students learnt. The paper does not assess if the students improved their writing on Aboriginal issues since it was the first time for them to write on such topics. The placement will be offered again in July 2010.

A New Initiative: Student Journalists Learn about Aboriginal Communities and Culture in Western Australia

Abstract: This paper reports on a new initiative between the Combined Universities Centre for Rural Health (CUCRH) and the journalism program at Edith Cowan University (ECU). The main aim is to help journalism students achieve a better understanding of Aboriginal communities and culture in Western Australia, and that this new knowledge and experience will inform student news stories and feature articles on Aboriginal issues. Currently, non-Aboriginal journalists seldom get to meet and talk with Aboriginal people about their life and beliefs, and this often results in narrow and misinformed reporting. So in July 2008, eight final-year ECU journalism students were offered an opportunity by CUCRH to participate in a one-month journalism placement with Aboriginal communities in two Western Australian towns. At the end of the placement, the students were asked to prepare a brief written report on what they had learnt from the experience. A common response was that the students had gained substantial knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal people (and about themselves). The prime focus of the paper is on what the students learnt. The paper does not assess if the students improved their writing on Aboriginal issues since it was the first time for them to write on such topics. The placement will be offered again in July 2010.

Introduction

Indigenous issues are not considered by many editors and journalists to be news because they do not appeal to the majority of readers, and are only considered newsworthy by some newspapers if they can be sensationalised. Yet, the media are a major (if not only) source of information for many non-Indigenous Australians about Aboriginal affairs

The news media play a significant role, as they have always done, in framing the ways on which we think about issues, especially indigenous issues, as there are virtually no other sources of information for most people...Journalism continues to play a crucial role in imaging Indigenous people and their affairs for most non-Indigenous people. (Meadows, 2005, p 39)

Also, few non-Aboriginal journalists have met, let alone talked or discussed with aboriginal people about their life, culture and current difficulties. The result is that news stories are often inaccurate and portray a distorted and stereotypical view of Aboriginal communities as places of constant disorder and drunkenness.

This raises a key question for journalism educators: how to find an effective way to train student journalists to report more accurately and fairly on Aboriginal issues, especially in Western Australia which has one of the largest Aboriginal populations in Australia. In 2006,

Associate Professor Ross James, a member of the Combined Universities Centre for Rural Health (CUCRH) team in Port Hedland, was invited to present a guest lecture on 'Reporting Aboriginal health' to journalism students at Edith Cowan University's Mount

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Lawley campus in Perth. During the lecture, he stressed that one way to improve the reporting of Aboriginal issues was for non-Aboriginal journalists to visit Aboriginal communities and discuss directly with them about their hopes, fears and problems. He argued that this would be an important first-step in a long process and he issued an open invitation to the students to visit some communities in and around Port Hedland. Only one student took up his challenge in 2006 and two students in 2007. All three students remarked in email correspondence how beneficial the experience had been because they had direct access to Aboriginal people and this, they said, influenced their attitude towards Aboriginal issues.

Then, in July 2008, eight ECU journalism students were offered an opportunity by CUCRH to work for one-month with Aboriginal communities in two Western Australian towns. This was a significant departure from the usual ECU journalism placement unit (CMM3104), where students apply for a one-month placement in a Perth-based newsroom and seldom leave the confines of the media outlet. Often, there is little engagement with the topics or the people they interview and report on. CUCRH's invitation presented a new approach – direct engagement with Aboriginal people that offered the prospect of improved understanding of aboriginal issues. It was understood that it was the students rather than the Aboriginal communities who would really gain from this placement, and the students expressed (in the feedback section) a genuine gratitude for their generosity during their stay with them.

First, this paper examines some studies on the reporting on Aboriginal issues in the Australian media and then selects the theory of Situated Learning to provide a theoretical framework and pedagogical rationale for the placement. Second, there is a description of the methods and the placement itself with feedback from the students. The final section reflects on the findings.

Background Information: Reporting on Aboriginal Issues

While this paper does not present an exhaustive list of research studies on the reporting of Aboriginal issues in the Australian media, it is evident from those mentioned in this section that there is a room for improvement in both content and representation. Hartley and McKee's (2000) argue in *The Indigenous Public Sphere* that “compared with the proportion of Aboriginal and Islander people in the Australian population in the 1990s, Indigenous stories were massively *over*-represented in the media” (Hartley and McKee, 2000, p. 49). Their argument hinges on the fact that Indigenous Australians have a “right to be ordinary” and the media should seek to “report Aboriginality via its mundane rather than its ‘fatal’ aspects” (Hartley and McKee, 2000, p.45). This argument may provide a missing link between the issue of Indigenous reporting and the pedagogical rationale of a placement within Aboriginal communities as a means of tackling problems in existing journalism. This is to say that what a placement like this might be understood to achieve is giving students a chance to experience the *ordinariness* of Indigenous people, rather than always encountering/representing Indigeneity as an “issue”. An appreciation of the mundane aspects to Aboriginality may be what is necessary for achieving fairness and accuracy in news reporting on Indigenous people.

Other research studies on media coverage of aboriginal issues include Meadows, Hippocrates and Van Vuuren (1997). In this study, they compared the coverage of newspaper stories in *The Courier-Mail* and *The Cairns Post* to the television news stories of ABC TV and National Nine News between 28th January and 3rd February. The case study examined news coverage of Indigenous protest meetings in Brisbane together with a broader sweep of all news stories that dealt with Indigenous affairs in that period (Meadows et al, p. 73). The researchers found 28 print news stories but only nine quoted Indigenous sources directly, and 15 television news stories of which only three allowed an Indigenous person to speak on

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Indigenous issues. Meadows continued his research on media coverage of Aboriginal issues (2001 & 2005) and he remains highly critical of media presentation of Aboriginal issues.

Although the trend in the past 20 years has been away from the overt racism of the colonial press, institutionalized racism is manifested in the systematic omission of Indigenous voices in the news media. Indigenous sources make up a fraction -between a fifth to one third - of all sources used by journalists in stories about Indigenous affairs. This situation had remained unchanged in Australian journalism for the past 20 years. (Meadows, 2005, p. 36)

He ends pessimistically with the statement: “The picture which emerges from a long history of indifference towards Indigenous people is a continuing media misrepresentation of their identities and lifestyles (Meadows, 2005, p. 39). Meadows states that many indigenous groups have responded by turning their backs on mainstream media and engaging in their own forms of cultural production, primarily radio television and new media technology, and creating what he describes as Indigenous public spheres. This idea was discussed earlier by Hartley and McKee (2000). For them the concept of indigenous sphere was intended to describe the highly mediated public space for developing notions of Indigeneity which the authors state has “hardly been under the control of Indigenous people (Hartley & McKee, 2000, p. 3).

The study by Roberts (2007) explored the representation of Indigenous Australians in the *Herald Sun*, *The Age* and *The Australian* newspapers between 1st April and 10th July. The main focus of this study was the reporting of Aboriginal health and the social determinants of health. This study found 505 articles featuring Indigenous Australians with only six per cent on Indigenous health. The *Herald Sun* focused on Indigenous sport and art while *The Australian* placed a strong emphasis on Indigenous politics and art. *The Age* focused mainly on Indigenous sport and politics. The author concluded that Indigenous health was not a high priority for these newspapers.

Australian health writer, Melissa Sweet, conducted a series of interviews on the topic of media coverage of Aboriginal health in March 2009. Here is a sample of the feedback from some of the interviewees. Simon Holding, a senior researcher in the School of Public Health at the University of Sydney, was highly critical of media coverage of Aboriginal health and said it tended to deal in stereotypes and to be unrelentingly negative. He added: “There are so few stories on Aboriginal health that they don’t rate as a major category.” Former television journalist, Jeff McMullen was equally unimpressed with the media’s performance. “The truth is that the media is conveying a sense of hopelessness and despair that feeds the trauma, the general mental illness and the sense of powerlessness amongst the most disadvantaged people” (Sweet, 2009). McMullen thinks there are real problems around reporting on Aboriginal health because so many journalists and news editors are ignorant of indigenous history and culture. Dr Tamara Mackean, president of the Australian Indigenous Doctors Association (AIDA), describes the media’s portrayal of Aboriginal people as perpetuating a discourse of “total negative deficit” and argues that Aboriginal people are hesitant to talk to the media because they see journalists portraying them as always fighting and lacking leadership. Mackean, however, offers a solution: “I would get small group of journalists together and get them to listen to the people, to hear Aboriginal peoples’ concerns and how they are being portrayed (Sweet, 2009). I think both McMullen and Mackean would support the aims of the CUCRH sponsored journalism placement with Aboriginal communities in Western Australia.

The Theory of Situated Learning

The theory of situated learning (or situated cognition) was first described by Brown, Collins and Duguid (1989) and developed out of observing successful learning situations by the researchers. They wanted to find examples of learning in any context or culture which were effective and to analyse the key features of such models. An analysis of common features found in all the successful models was a set of six critical factors: apprenticeship, collaboration, reflection, coaching, multiple practice and articulation.

A key point for Brown, Collins and Duguid (1989) is that meaningful learning will only take place if it is embedded in the social and physical context within which it will be used. Formal learning is often quite distinct from authentic activity, or 'the ordinary practices of the culture' (Brown et al, 1989, p. 34). Many of the activities undertaken by students are unrelated to the kind performed by practitioners in their everyday work. A means of achieving authenticity, they proposed, was the model of *cognitive apprenticeships*, a method designed to "enculturate" students into authentic practices through activity and social interaction' and based on the successful and traditional apprenticeship model (Brown et al, 1989, p. 37). A critical aspect of the situated learning model is the notion of the apprentice observing the 'community of practice'. Indeed, the theory of situated learning provides a pedagogical theory and rationale for this journalism placement because of its focus on learning through observing Aboriginal communities/practices in their own environment and using this new knowledge to inform content.

It must be noted that Resnick (1987) pre-empted situated learning by proposing that 'bridging apprenticeships' be designed to bridge the gap between the theoretical learning in the formal instruction of the classroom and the real-life application of the knowledge in the work environment.

Lave and Wenger (1991) proposed that participation in a culture of practice can, in the first instance, be observation from the boundary or 'legitimate peripheral participation'. As learning and involvement in the culture increase, the participant moves from the role of observer to fully functioning agent. Legitimate peripheral participation enables the learner to progressively piece together the culture of the group and what it means to be a member. "To be able to participate in a legitimately peripheral way entails that newcomers have broad access to arenas of mature practice" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 110).

In response to these ideas, a common response from the journalism students on the one-month placement was that it created greater awareness among the students about aboriginal culture. This can be viewed as supplementing journalism lectures and tutorials that provide background theory and knowledge but which are unable to provide a real context and experience of the actual reality. During the placement, the students were allowed to observe and experience, to a small degree, the complexity of the life and problems that some Aboriginal communities face in Western Australia. The scope of this case study was too limited to fully test or add to the theory of situated learning but the theory does provide a conceptual framework for a longer and more detailed research into this kind of journalism placement, possibly as a longitudinal study.

There are, however, some difficulties when one attempts to construct learning environments that employ the principles and elements described by the proponents of situated learning theories. The literature reveals a number of case studies, and some research, that support the situated learning approach as a successful model of instruction and learning: Griffin (1995); Bransford, Sherwood, Hasselbring, Kinzer, and Williams, (1990); Bransford, Vye, Kinzer and Risko, (1990); Young, (1993). Critics of the theory argue that situated learning requires learners to be exposed to 'masters' or experts in the practice of their trade and therefore it cannot be, by its very definition, transferred to the classroom (Tripp, 1993; Wineburg, 1989).

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It must be noted that another theory, closely linked to the theory of situated learning, is the 'theory of authentic learning' which has a strong focus on problem-based learning. This has been used by many journalism programs, especially the more vocation-orientated programs. By definition, the term 'authentic learning' means learning that uses real-world problems and projects, and that allow students to explore and discuss these problems. This approach differs from the traditional 'lecture' where teachers impart knowledge which the students often have to memorize.

Research Design – Case Study

This paper uses a descriptive and exploratory case study to detail what ECU journalism students did and what they said they had learnt from a one-month journalism placement with Aboriginal communities in two Western Australian towns. The qualitative data was gathered from written reports from the eight students who participated in the journalism placement. There was only one open-ended question - What did you learn from the placement? So, this paper has limited objectives – a description of the project and a review of student feedback to see what the students had learnt about Aboriginal communities and culture. An assessment of whether the students had improved their writing on Aboriginal issues during the placement was not part of this study. This was because the students had never written a news story or feature article on such topics before the placement, The students, however, were encouraged to publish in local newspapers and the section on student feedback shows that most students succeeded in this.

The placements in Port Hedland and Geraldton in July 2008 were organised and financed by CUCRH, which is part of a national network of university departments of rural health funded by the Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing. CUCRH is managed by a consortium that includes Curtin University of Technology, Edith Cowan University and the University of Western Australia, and they financed the flights, accommodation and paid a small living allowance to the students during their placement. Such resources definitely added to the success of the placement, and at each location there was a CUCRH staff member who acted as a guide and mentor. The placements were broken into two distinct parts: first, an induction into the history, culture and tradition of the Aboriginal people in the region where the students worked and a visit to several Aboriginal committees (accompanied by CUCRH staff). Second, a focus on the journalistic process when students researched, interviewed and wrote their articles.

Two journalism students were offered a placement in Geraldton (450 km north of Perth) in July 2008. First, they completed an introductory workshop at the Geraldton Regional Aboriginal Medical Service (GRAMS). Then they attended Wajarri language classes at the Irra Wangga Language Centre and ended their induction with a media forum that included representatives from local media and Aboriginal organizations. In the second part of the placement, the students investigated issues specifically related to health in the local Aboriginal community and wrote articles for the local and Indigenous media outlets such as the *Geraldton Guardian*, the *Yamaji News* and *WA Today* on *The West Australian* website. The students covered various events surrounding NAIDOC week which celebrates the history, culture and achievements of Aboriginal and Torres Strait people.

In July 2008 CUCRH hosted six Journalism students for one-month placement in Port Hedland, located 1600 km north of Perth and the largest town in the Pilbara region. First, the students participated in a cultural awareness workshop run by the Wangka Maya Language Centre and were mentored by a senior Thalanji Aboriginal woman for the duration of their placement. Accompanied visits were organized to Warralong a remote Aboriginal community, and to Roebourne, Karratha and Onslow. Students met a range of Indigenous organizations and were invited to participate in activities organized by Indigenous

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organizations such as the NAIDOC ball. The students worked with a journalist from the *NorthWest Telegraph* on a number of health related stories. The main project for the month was called 'The Health Heroes of the Pilbara'. Students were given a range of contacts and generated human interest stories with a health theme. They were encouraged to submit their articles to a range of local and indigenous media outlets including the *North West Telegraph*, *The West Australian*, the *Yamaji News*, the *Pilbara News* and the *Koori Mail*. Two of the students attended a radio workshop, edited community service announcements and conducted a weekly radio program under the supervision of the station manager.

Feedback from the Student

Eight journalism students based at Geraldton (2) Port Headland (6) were asked to write a brief report and highlight what they had learnt from the journalism placement. Here is a small sample of their replies that describe what they thought they had learnt. The author decided against including all the written replies to avoid repetition, and he inserted italics in the text to highlight the scope and depth of the experience.

Understanding the Culture

Working alongside Aboriginal people and health workers at GRAMS was an especially profound experience for me. I had the opportunity to listen to people talk of Indigenous health issues, and some of the unfortunate effects a lack of knowledge and access to medical care can have on the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal people. My learning was not restricted to health; I saw evidence of a strong, proud people who are encouraging their children to stand tall. I often felt emotional because I can sense what a breakdown in a strong culture like theirs can do. But more importantly, I witnessed the positivity and commitment of many community members to keeping their culture and community strong.

The time here has been valuable for life lessons as a whole. It has taught me not to stereo type a group of people, for example just because I am white does not mean that I am the same as every other white person. I also learnt the value of listening, and I mean really listening.

This placement taught me a lot about how Aboriginal's use storytelling, and how they value narratives to learn and teach people. I also learnt the value of respect.

We received one day of cultural awareness training and *I was blown away by how much I didn't know about aboriginal cultural and communication methods,* which are so different to the way we communicate with each other.

I also felt that *I was quickly able to build a strong communication method with many of the Aboriginal people I interviewed which enabled me to write better.* I certainly didn't expect to have work published, let alone to be able to work so independently

After talking to many aboriginal people in Port Hedland and surrounding areas, *I started to notice how inappropriate some of the sources used in articles for The West Australian and The Australian were.* After learning the importance of tribal boundaries and also the different issues faced by different communities, the sources were from areas that had no relation to the area in topic in the articles.

Placement reinforced for me the important role the media has to play in covering Indigenous health issues and also in bridging the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

This was the most valuable thing I have done in the whole time I have been at uni. I learnt to be more confident, *culturally aware,* and discovered that I am much more resilient than I thought. The people I met were so welcoming and were some of the most amazing

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people I have ever met. It also enabled me to make valuable contacts and also enabled me to realise that I could work in an area like this.

I cannot put into words how informative and useful this experience was, assisting me in both my work and in my social interactions with the indigenous community.

The thing I liked most about this placement is that we were expected to work independently and actively go out and talk to different members of the community. I cannot describe how valuable this was. I have definitely learnt to step out of my comfort zone and going out to places that I felt uncomfortable have made me feel confident in being able to talk to anyone.

I would suggest to other students who are serious about journalism take the opportunity to go on placement and *get as much experience as possible before trying to find a job in the field.*

I am incredibly grateful for this experience, both personally and professionally, and *I do not doubt it will assist me in my future life and career.*

Practical Outcomes (Published Articles)

I went to Geraldton with the goal of writing at least ten stories and hopefully having half of those published. *I am proud to say I wrote twelve stories and had all of them published.* Two of my stories were published in the *Geraldton Guardian*, one of which was also picked up by *The West Australian* and published online. I had a further few published in the *Midwest Times* which is connected with the *Geraldton Guardian*. Then all the rest were published in the June, July and August issues of the indigenous newspaper, the *Yamaji News*.

In total six of my articles were published which included a page two article about the proposed new federal Indigenous body and about an Indigenous health worker who received a NAIDOC award. Two of my articles appeared in *Yamaji News*.

Some of the topics I wrote stories on were: breast screening for Aboriginal women, NAIDOC week activities, vaccines for Aboriginal people, the Indigenous Women's Cancer Support Group, postnatal depression, and the Strong Family Strong Culture Program.

Negative Comments

While the majority of student comments stressed the placement provided a positive learning experience, there were some problems in adapting to a new physical and cultural environment. Here are some of the comments.

There was no one to meet us when we arrived and the keys to the hostel were missing.

The laid-back attitude was frustrating especially when we got very vague instructions.

The internet at one location didn't work which made it difficult to complete our stories.

The late cultural training meant we had plenty of chances to insult people before that time.

It was annoying when some would turn up late for an interview or not show at all.

Findings

There were no great expectations about this project other than to expand the knowledge of

Aboriginal culture and issues among Third year journalism students so that, as future journalists, they might consider writing on aboriginal issues, and that they would be armed with more knowledge than they had received in the classroom. A key finding from the sample

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of student reports was that the one-month journalism placement created greater awareness among the students about aboriginal culture, about themselves and about their approach to writing articles on aboriginal issues. These outcomes can be viewed as supplementing journalism lectures and tutorials that provide background theory and knowledge but which fail to provide a real context and experience of the actual reality. The Aboriginal elders and people who gave their time to the students should be thanked for there was no gain for them in the short term.

It was difficult to assess whether there had been an improvement with the students' writing on Aboriginal issues because none of them had ever written a news story or feature article on such topics before the placement. The fact that they had many news stories published while in Geraldton and Port Hedland was indeed a positive outcome. It is highly unlikely that this would have happened if the students had just relied on lecture and tutorial notes on reporting Aboriginal issues or if they had applied for a placement in a Perth newsroom. What's more, two of the students now work as full-time reporters on the *Geraldton Guardian* and the *Pilbara News*.

Positive feedback from the ECU journalism students and the staff at GRAMS and CUCRH has resulted in the allocation of eight more journalism placements in Geraldton and Port Hedland in July 2010. This project is still at an early stage and can only really provide a description with limited feedback, but the next case study on the 2010 placement will involve the use of a questionnaire that seeks more precise and detailed responses from students and staff, together with a wider range of views that include aboriginal elders and health workers to determine the impact of the student placement and publications. If the placement continues beyond 2010, then it will be possible to construct a longitudinal study to evaluate how worthwhile and viable such a placement is for all the stakeholders.

Another aspect is that a placement like this allows the students to experience the *ordinariness* of Indigenous people, rather than always encountering/representing Indigeneity as an 'issue'. Maybe, an appreciation of the mundane aspects to Aboriginality may be what is necessary for achieving fairness and accuracy in news reporting on Indigenous people.

This student placement with Aboriginal communities in Western Australia was possible because of the support of GRAMS and CUCRH. They allowed the journalism students to join an existing placement they had set up for nurses to work in remote Western Australia. But this placement with its main emphasis on acquiring a broader knowledge from being "out in the field" could have wider implications and challenge to journalism course coordinators in other universities, especially the possibility of offering different kinds of journalism placements? Apart from working in Aboriginal communities, there are other placements that move beyond the traditional newsroom placement for journalism students. These might involve asking the students to work alongside other professionals such as social workers, doctors, teachers, local politicians as a way to get to understand the complex environment and related problems. Alternatively, why not send students to job centres, drug rehabilitation clinics or emergency wards? Such close-up experiences would have obvious benefits for future health, social, police and political reporters, especially learning in an authentic environment and providing a real context to understand complex human issues. These are ideas to ponder rather than a call for a drastic overall of journalism placements in Australian universities. There is an ongoing debate about the type and value of journalism placements (Furlan, 2007 p. 127). This placement adds some data and another perspective to the debate.

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