

# Introducing experiential learning to the curriculum: a case study from journalism

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## Abstract

This paper explores the rationale, benefits and practical challenges of introducing experiential learning to an undergraduate curriculum. It studies the case of Newsweek, a multi-platform journalism exercise conducted within the curriculum in real time and resulting in real-world outcomes. Newsweek has involved students from three related undergraduate journalism degrees, at levels 4, 5 and 6, collaborating to run a live website and produce a print publication. This presentation (focusing on November 2016) draws on surveys and interviews with participating students and staff, as well as recent research in experiential learning and journalism education, to suggest key areas for tutors in all disciplines to consider if planning a similar activity. Particular issues include the balance of tutor involvement with student autonomy, the challenges of scheduling such activity within the timetable and across different modules, student participation and engagement, and the fundamental question of what constitutes 'learning' in this context.

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## Introduction

In 2016, University of Brighton Journalism and Sport Journalism lecturers challenged their students to run a live website and produce a 24 page print publication in a week. Contact time on eight practical modules was devoted to the tasks, with students from different degrees and levels of study involved in populating the website, conceptualising and designing the print publication, and in writing and editing its contents.

The author instigated the project and conducted this research to monitor its execution against module, course and broader pedagogical aims, drawing on the body of literature concerning experiential learning in higher education and journalism education in particular.

An element of practical publication has been available to Sport and Service Management students since 2011. Overtimeonline.co.uk was founded as a virtual learning environment in which students could practise and publish journalism outside curricular assessments (McEnnis and Parsons 2016). That resource, and the experience of engagement with it, was therefore already available to tutors and students. Further,



*The student generated magazine: Overtime*

## Literature review

Experiential learning is espoused as a pedagogical framework for the introduction of real-world practical activity into the journalism curriculum (Brandon 2002). Kolb (2015) describes the experiential learning process as comprising concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation and active experimentation. Suggested elements of experiential learning activities include the need for initiative, decision-making and accountability for results on the part of the learner, for reflection, and for the task to be authentic (National Society for Experiential Education [NSEE], 2013; Association for Experiential Education [AEE], 2014). Requirements of 'authentic' tasks synthesised by Reeves, Herrington and Oliver (2002) include that they match real-world practice, contain ill-defined problems, allow competing potential solutions and culminate in a polished product.

These criteria cater to learning styles characteristic of undergraduates. Knowles's 'andragogy' (1980): education methods for adult, rather than child, learners, includes experiential learning, problem-solving and self-direction. Conklin (2012) espouses 'autonomy-supportive classrooms' for millennial learners more inclined towards active learning, problem-solving and group activities. Models relevant to experiential learning include student-centred learning, problem-based learning and the 'classroom as organisation'.

For journalism educators, such methods answer a need for courses to go beyond the compartmentalisation of knowledge and skills into 'silos' (St Clair 2015). Graduate careers website Graduate Prospects (2015) lists (in addition to technical and occu-

Newsweek's printing costs were supported by the school. Journalism students also had continual access to a dedicated work space, the Priory Square Newsroom, with computers equipped with relevant professional packages.

Sport Journalism and Journalism students at levels 4 and 5 acted as contributors to the website and paper, with module contact time from four modules at each level dedicated to it. Sport Journalism and Travel Journalism students at level 6 formed the editorial team on an extra-curricular basis.

This paper aims to illustrate the potential benefits and challenges involved in introducing experiential learning of this sort to the curriculum.

pation-specific skills) transferable skills sought by employers of journalists as critical analysis, self-management, interpersonal skills, leadership, flexibility and independence, meeting deadlines, communication and teamwork. Bronstein and Fitzpatrick (2015) call for the integration of leadership into teaching programmes, highlighting a particular area of potential benefit for female graduates. The authenticity criteria above are relevant to research suggesting that students need to prepare for the 'liquid' (Baumann 2000), uncertain (Barnett 2012), 'permanent white water' (Vaill 1996) of the working world.

In published accounts of the introduction of experiential learning activities to journalism curriculums, students covered elections (Steel, Carmichael, Holmes et al. 2007), produced individual blogs (Stoker 2015; St Clair 2015), launched magazines (Rhodes and Roessner 2009), published online news reports (Parks 2015; McEnnis and Parsons 2016) and produced radio programmes (Baines 2012).

Those studies illustrated perceived benefits, including improved confidence (Steel, Carmichael, Holmes et al. 2007; Stoker 2015; St Clair 2015), pride and a sense of responsibility (Steel, Carmichael, Holmes et al. 2007; Parks 2015; Rhodes and Roessner 2009). Stoker (2015) reported qualities of 'self-starting', an ability to initiate change and cope with uncertainty. St Clair (2015) noted an increased readiness for the workplace. The adoption of professional identity and values was reported by Simon and Sapp (2006) and Stoker (2015).

Several of the cited projects included reflective activity by students (cf Kolb 2015), ranging from exit interviews (Rhodes and Roessner 2009) to informal discussion among students (Parks 2015) and interviews and surveys conducted in lecturers' research activity (Stoker 2015; Simon and Sapp 2006).

The published research has also identified some challenges in successfully delivering the activities. Experiential activities are time and resource-intensive (Steel, Carmichael, Holmes et al. 2007; St Clair 2015; Parks 2015). Steel, Carmichael, Holmes et al. (2007) recognised the need for longer preparatory lead-in time; Parks (2015) included five weeks of orientation. Stoker (2015), St Clair (2015) and Kanigel (2014) suggested activity should be aligned with curriculum intended learning outcomes to allow module time to be dedicated to it.

Several of these researchers encountered challenges to tutors in judging the extent of their intervention in projects, for example, to correct error (Parks 2015; Steel, Carmichael, Holmes et al. 2007). McEnnis and Parsons (2016) suggested tutors should accept a varying level of quality to preserve student ownership of a project. These experiences echo observations in pedagogical literature (for example, Conklin 2012), that while tutors provide the scaffolding for a project, they need courage to give up control over the outcome. Reeve and Jang (2006) suggested eight approaches tutors can use to support autonomy: these include offering praise and encouragement but allowing error, and offering hints but not answers or 'truth'. Kolb, Kolb, Passarelli et al. (2014) set out a profile for an 'experiential educator', identifying four roles for tutors: coach, facilitator, standard-setter and subject expert.

The benefits of experiential learning and student autonomy are contested by some pedagogical researchers. Kirschner, Sweller and Clark (2006) concluded 'minimal guidance' is less effective than direct guidance in instruction. They cited Roblyer, Edwards and Havriluk (1997) in suggesting that 'discovery learning' is only successful when a certain amount of knowledge is already in place. Seaman (2008) suggested tutors should move on from adherence to a learning cycle as a sole means of understanding the delivery of experiential education.

The Newsweek project goes beyond those in the extant academic literature in its scale: it involves students at all levels, and involves more than one degree course. This research has the potential to extend knowledge not only by evaluating the delivery of this experiential learning activity but also by further considering practical issues faced in introducing experiential learning to the curriculum.

## Methodology

To evaluate the impact and implementation of the project, the November 2016 Newsweek was followed by a quantitative survey of level 4 and 5 students, and qualitative interviews with level 6 student editors and with lecturers involved in the project (not including the author).

The aim of the survey was to establish whether students felt the activity matched the intended learning outcomes of the modules from which time was drawn, and identify potential improvements in the design and delivery of the project.

The survey listed all the intended learning outcomes for each of the practical modules associated with the activity, and asked students to indicate on a Likert scale if they thought they had had the opportunity to demonstrate those outcomes.

For example: 'Do you agree with the following statement? 'During the Newsweek I had the chance to show an understanding of digital platforms and audience demands'.

Students were also asked for free text comments on what went well, what could be improved and for any other remarks.

Qualitative interviews were then carried out with four student editors, and with three tutors, to gather opinions about the perceived benefits and challenges presented by the project, and reflection on the course curriculum and on individuals' own practice (whether as teachers or learners).

The researcher subjected the free text comments and interview data to a framework analysis and open coding process, grouping comments thematically.

## Findings

*'You don't really know what you know until you're put into a situation where you have to figure it out'. (Student interviewee).*

A total of 27 students from levels 4 and 5 of the Journalism and Sport Journalism degrees responded to the survey, from a combined total of 70 students.



Our students' paper hits the campuses today. Congratulations @OverTime\_Online and all involved #theONE.



We asked students if they felt the project had enabled them to work towards the learning outcomes of the modules associated with the project. In 23 out of 30 cases a majority agreed that they had that chance. There were no modules for which students felt fewer than half of learning outcomes were engaged with during the project.

The project is thus considered a valid use of module time, contributing to the learning outcomes of modules involved.

The framework analysis of responses to interviews with tutors and students, and of survey free comments, identified findings under the broad themes of employability, learning, and project structure.

## Employability

The project provides an opportunity to develop transferable skills associated with employability. Tutors recognised the development of students' transferable skills; student editors commented they had the chance to work under deadline pressure, collaborate, develop self-reliance and practise leadership. In both interviews and free comments, students identified autonomy and self-direction as beneficial, for example, enjoying the opportunity to write about subjects they had not covered before.

Reflection enabled students to evaluate the deepening of their understanding of the occupation and their direction within it. Students in both interviews and free comments described feeling better oriented towards the occupation. One typical remark was, 'Newsweek showed me what it would be like to work in a newsroom and what it takes to be a journalist'. One editor spoke of developing an unexpected interest in news, rather than sport; another recognised an 'improved work ethic' and feeling part of the industry.

## Learning

The experiential learning activity was a useful diagnostic exercise for lecturers to inform course content and delivery after observing students' performance. Students appreciated the chance to practise 'hard skills', with free comments referring to page design, match reporting and interviewing, particularly by phone. Student editors felt the curriculum had prepared them for their task. However, tutors and student editors identified learning needs including interviewing, finding sources, editing, and differentiation between news and comment. Lecturers felt knowledge 'silos' persisted in student practice. For example, some students had taken a module and passed exams in media law, with a particular focus on defamation risks and the defences available to journalists, but when they were reading articles submitted for publica-

tion, in a working newsroom rather than a lecture hall, did not spot potentially defamatory content in the text. Tutors considered curriculum changes including enhanced interview training, a greater role for reflection in assessments, and opportunities for students to coordinate each other in class activities.

Engagement may be affected by a tension between non-assessed projects and module assessment, creating conflicting priorities for students. Participation was perhaps unsurprisingly felt to be better among students whose class time was attached to the project. Tutors and students were pleased with the energy displayed by students and the positive engagement from first and second years. Third-year students, who did not have module time attached, participated in smaller numbers. Students speculated on whether some students were prioritising assessments over participation.

## Structure

The authenticity of the project was recognised, and thought open to improvement; lead-in activity was identified as a means to improve the structure of the week. Lecturers and students described the task as authentic to real-world publishing. However, tutors identified that traditional roles in the newsroom had become blurred, and workflow was not managed in standard ways. Students remarked in interviews and free comments that, for example, editors had become too involved in page design.

The structure or ‘scaffolding’ (Conklin 2012), involving a published rota of tasks, an assumption of roles by third year volunteers and planning of stories, was deemed beneficial by tutors and students. However, in free comments, participants called for more choice in assigned roles and commented on a lack of direction in undertaking some roles. One read: ‘Writers and editors should meet before Newsweek as many things were changed at the last minute and page layouts, and consequently plans, were not respected’.

Tutors identified potential to extend the ‘lead-in’ phase so students could familiarise themselves with the processes required in running the project. They suggested advertising job descriptions (written by tutors) to delineate roles, and asking students in preparation sessions to develop a production schedule to spread work over the week.

At times, too much tutor involvement diminished students’ autonomous decision-making and leadership of the project. Students pointed out both contradictory advice from staff, and a confusion among participants over whether students or lecturers had more influence. Tutors interviewed were aware in hindsight that they had risked a negative impact on the autonomy of the students through intervention, and that contradictory advice from different members of staff could cause confusion.

## Discussion

The use of time from modules was justified because the students’ activity applied to the learning outcomes of those modules. This aspect of the project built on recommendations of St Clair (2015), Parks (2015) and Kanigel (2014). Lecturers introducing experiential activity should note that Newsweek required the participation of the leaders of those eight modules, and coordination within the curriculum to avoid

disrupting assessments. Lecturers and students also had access to their own workspace and funding to print the product.

The transferable skills identified matched several of those listed as sought-after by employers, including leadership (Graduate Prospects 2013; Bronstein and Fitzpatrick 2015). This, combined with the ill-defined nature of the task and the self-direction of the student, can provide within the curriculum a preparation for the uncertainty of working life suggested by Barnett (2012).

However, student self-direction, autonomy and leadership can plainly be disturbed if tutor interaction becomes tutor intervention. It is tempting to try to prevent shortcomings in the final product (cf Steel, Carmichael, Holmes et al. 2007; McEnnis and Parsons 2016). The educational role of lecturers in this project could be described as helping students learn by creating the product, rather than by helping them create the product itself; as facilitator (cf Kolb, Kolb, Passarelli et al. 2014), rather than co-creator. Reflexivity is required of lecturers in their interactions with students, adhering to the standards of Reeve and Jang (2006), to achieve this - and courage of the sort referred to by Conklin (2012).

Recognition of the potential to improve the structure of the task using lead-in activity recalled Steel, Carmichael, Holmes, et al. (2007) and Parks (2015). Tutors designing a project of this sort need to be mindful of what students are expected to learn. In this case, students learning and practising the skills involved in producing a print publication do not have to develop for themselves the production process, which in industry is based on settled norms. The lead-in phase is arguably where the tutor can have a direct impact while enhancing, not diminishing, autonomy. Hmelo-Silver, Duncan and Chinn (2007) suggested that students need the clay of prerequisite knowledge to throw their pot: this project suggested the tutor should provide the wheel and the kiln, too. Specific suggestions from tutors included setting job descriptions for editors, convening preparatory meetings to invite them to consider workflow, and preparatory in-class activity with participants in relevant modules' contact time.

Reflection is one of the four stages of Kolb's learning cycle (2015); it is also among the components of experiential learning suggested by the NSEE (2013) and AEE (2014). The survey invited students to reflect on progress towards learning outcomes; interviews invited students to reflect on their own practice. However, reflection could be further directed towards learning, rather than towards activity during the project or the functioning of the project itself. Reflection can be focused forwards, as well as back. In this project and other published reports, reflection has been a way of rounding off an experience; however, Kolb's experiential learning cycle conceives reflection as part of a process which is followed by conceptualisation and action. While Seaman (2008) disputed the need for a 'cycle', it would strengthen the learning value of reflective activity if it were oriented towards future activity by the student, inviting them to consider how they would develop their own practice as a result of the experience.

## Conclusion

Academics considering the introduction of experiential learning can draw from the findings and discussion in this research to strengthen their design and delivery. To justify allocating module contact time, the activity must contribute to students' progress towards associated module learning outcomes. To add to student learning, organisers could benefit from clearly identifying learning aims and ensuring that students have sufficient prerequisite knowledge to fulfil the tasks they are set. The research suggests that time should be allocated for focused preparatory activity, to enable effective learning during the task, and, if organisation and management are not part of the curriculum, leaders should be provided with an appropriate model and structure within which to work. Reflective activity might be more effective if it is not conceived as a backward-looking exercise on activity, but as a forward-looking exercise focusing on learning progress. Finally, despite the emphasis on the learner's experience in experiential learning, there are clear observational opportunities for tutors to appraise and improve the non-experiential curriculum.

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## Biography

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