OVERVIEW: SUMMARY OF CONTRIBUTION AND CONTEXT

In 2008, there was clear evidence that the media industry had moved from traditional print to more digital, online content and required differently skilled reporters and writers. There was a drastic reduction in staff at these media organisations including Fairfax Media which cut about 550 employees in Australia and New Zealand or roughly five per cent of the company’s full-time workforce. The media organisations were sending out a clear message that print-only journalists would have to re-skill themselves in the new technologies if they expected to retain their jobs. It was clear that journalism schools would have to move from traditional print-based curricula and move on to digital and multimedia journalism training to produce media savvy ‘wired’ graduates adept at online news delivery, social media and digital storytelling.

Heeding this call, I drafted a proposal to refresh the journalism curriculum at James Cook University (JCU). The result is the Bachelor of Multimedia Journalism degree which is jointly offered by the School of Arts and Social Sciences and the School of Creative Arts, an Australian first in the journalism field. This innovative program is exemplified by four main activities that demonstrate a significant impact on student learning and engagement, and highlight my command of the field of journalism education. These activities are immersion in multimedia practice and peer collaboration for students, introduction of an innovative blog assessment task aligned with reflective practice; engagement with research-led teaching and teaching-led research activities; and design and delivery of the capstone internship program.

In 2009, I developed and embedded across the new curriculum the James Cook University News Network (JCNN) website jcnn.com.au to serve as a hands-on digital journalism laboratory that also showcases student work on tropical stories from North Queensland for a global online audience. Students engage in newsroom conference meetings in lieu of traditional tutorials to simulate real world news and editorial meetings. Following authentic industry-based practice, the news website subject JCNN provides students with editorial experience and a portfolio of work for employment in the technologically-driven changing media landscape of the 21st century.

As Industry Placement Coordinator, I redesigned the capstone internship subject and developed and made an assessable task the practice of reflection through online blogging. By combining the two activities, students reflect, develop the habit of posting regular entries as required by the medium of blogging while developing socially responsible and ethical online practice. I reported on these teaching innovations in my research and shared these with journalism colleagues around Australia through active participation in the annual conference hosted by the Journalism Education Association of Australia (www.jeaa.org.au) of which I am a member.

My strong leadership and multiple contributions to the development of this pioneering Journalism degree and student learning have been sustained over my six-year tenure with JCU as Head of the Journalism discipline and member of staff. These give evidence to the impact and reception of the work I have done through the eyes of both colleagues, industry partners and student graduates of the degree, reflecting my outstanding command of the field.

ASSESSMENT CRITERION 2: DEVELOPMENT OF CURRICA, RESOURCES AND SERVICES THAT REFLECT A COMMAND OF THE FIELD

Activity 1: Immersion in multimedia practice and peer collaboration for students

The Bachelor of Multimedia Journalism launched in 2009 attracts some 40 students each year. These students are guided, trained and steeped in features multimedia learning from day one. From 2008 to 2013, I have been subject coordinator, lecturer and tutor of the first year multimedia foundation subject, the JCNN multimedia website subject as well as the third year internship subject. The real-world industry-based newsroom and editorial practices I introduced in these subjects have led to increased student engagement as student editors lead discussions of the day’s stories, and review with the editorial team the
content, accuracy and timeliness of news stories covered and reported on. Third year students act as editors for work produced by first and second year students, thus fostering a community of learners (Tinto, 2003) within the whole degree. To foster this dependency across the years, I established a Facebook group JCNN StoryMine where students from all year levels are able to share news ideas and seek advice for contacts. This Facebook group has 114 members representing students across all three years, as well as recent graduates and is another innovative channel through which students and mentors engage and collaborate. Each student reporter has time to read over, listen to or watch, and critique each other’s work. Every student benefits from feedback from peers and lecturers. Just as in real life, student reporters develop critical skills, get direct feedback from editors and peers, and develop strong team work and collaborative skills. Students learn to accept and learn from constructive criticism as well as show respect for opinions expressed by others. They also come out of the subject with a portfolio of published and broadcast work. An example of this online portfolio is at http://sophiekesteven.wix.com/sophie-kesteven.

Student evaluations of this immersion in multimedia indicate very high levels of satisfaction, In 2009, for example I achieved a 4.27/5 rating teaching evaluation score. I maintained a 4.0 + rating in the next three years I coordinated and taught the same subject. In 2013, my teaching evaluation scores (44% response rate) for the capstone internship subject indicate outstanding satisfaction levels with a score of 4.5/5 in response to the question – ‘this staff member delivered subject material in a way that helped my learning’

Student feedback over this four-year period demonstrated students’ recognition of the learning that is taking place, the development of their writing as well as analytic skills and acknowledgement of the value of real-world editorial and newsroom practice to their future career as journalists.

JCNN is a brilliant way to further my skills (UES First Year Survey respondent, 2013).

JCNN was a great subject in that it prepared me for life after uni since we had to do all the fieldwork ourselves and meet deadlines etc (Laura McKee, BMJ graduate, 2014).

This subject was interesting and challenging, which helped me develop my analytical and problem solving skills. When I had difficulty or I was confused Amy was quick to respond in a clear and easy to understand by email or in person to help me come face-to-face with any issues I was having or questions I wanted to ask. Amy made the subject enjoyable, interactive and fun, while providing a strong foundation for future subjects and industries in the field of Journalism (Student feedback, 2012).

It was amazing being able to be tutored/taught by a person who works in the field that I wish to pursue. She gave wonderful feedback and answered any questions when asked. I always felt very welcomed during tutorials. It was wonderful having someone tutor you who knew what she was talking about (Student feedback, 2012).

Activity 2: Innovative blog assessment task aligned with reflective practice

Critically reflective practice has been promoted within the field of journalism as a way of ensuring competent practice (Thorpe, 2004) and developing self-awareness of competence that can be used to promote themselves to prospective employers (Coll et al, 2001). Although identified as a key skill for ethical and professional journalists, critical reflection is usually seen as an optional extra, with the challenge remaining as to how to embed this reflection into practice within an occupation that faces deadline pressures and immense time constraints.

As an innovative way of overcoming these challenges, I incorporated reflective blogging as an assessable requirement, to demonstrate the benefits of critically reflective professional practice. Maintaining a blog site of their experiences and reflection enabled students to cease to become passive participants and become critical agents in the learning process, both in the active selection of their learning experiences but also in their engagement with the new medium of blogging. I have sustained this practice from 2010 to the present and its success is demonstrated through the deep learning and greater self-awareness reported by the students.
This blog has had a somewhat cathartic role. It has given me both time and opportunity to consider the experiences I’ve had in my role as a Townsville Bulletin intern. I think it’s beneficial to have it as a weekly task, because it allows me to examine my performance critically, and educates me on how to improve my performance (Internship subject student blog entry, 2011).

Activity 3: Research-led teaching and teaching-led research in action

To share my learning experience from the curriculum and assessment initiatives, I researched, presented and published three articles on Work Integrated Learning (WIL), mentoring feedback and blogging with the New Zealand Association for Cooperative Education (www.nzace.ac.nz) and the Australian Collaborative Education Network (www.acen.edu.au).

In “Utilizing mentoring feedback in journalism work placements: producing work-ready graduates for the 21st century newsroom,” I analysed 28 internship supervisor reports through the period 2003 to 2008. The study found that supervisors considered the students’ journalistic writing skills above average but noted their lack of multimedia skills. They reported gaps in non-academic areas relating to initiative, confidence, enthusiasm and teamwork skills; areas for improvement and attention that were then subsequently addressed in future iterations of the internship subject. The second research on innovative assessment combining blogging and reflecting practice was reported in my research presented to NZACE. The third piece of research directly links to the added challenge of the innovative blogging activity. As one might appreciate, the blogging activity while useful, has also resulted in additional marking for the teacher. Developing a taxonomy of learning, and borrowing what is essentially a linguistics tool, the task of marking and validating the deep learning students acquire through blogging is made manageable through technology.

Activity 4: Design and delivery of the capstone internship program

As lone Internship Supervisor for the Multimedia Journalism degree at JCU since 2008, I re-designed the capstone internship subject and developed new contacts and opportunities for my students and for future employers to work together to their mutual benefit. At present, JCU Journalism students enjoy an excellent reputation across Townsville and beyond. Student and industry supervisors enter into a contract at the start of the internship and supervisors provide useful feedback and assessment of the work done. I share all feedback from the supervisor with the student and vice versa. This open and constructive flow of information has resulted in a better ‘fit’ between student and placement and achievement of expectations about the internship experience.

We find the students are better prepared for “real life” work when they come to us in third year, and that is evidence of the push to provide real world experience at university, with plenty of opportunities for students to be published. JCU’s journalism internship program is not only a well organised, efficient way for the university and the local newspaper to help guide student career aspirations, a number of those who have undertaken an internship have gone on to paid work in News Corporation, either at the Townsville Bulletin, or in one of North Queensland Newspapers’ regional mastheads (Ann Roebuck, Managing Editor for North Queensland, News Limited, 2014).

Dr Forbes’ has long been an advocate for the importance and benefits of industry placements to help produce job-ready graduates for the workforce. Dr Forbes is very well respected with the media community in North Queensland, so much so that her recommendation is enough for a graduate to secure employment (Linda Souter, PR & Marketing Manager Mater Health Services North Queensland, 2014).

EVIDENCE OF RECOGNITION

I have proactively developed, refreshed and delivered a degree that in the past three years has produced highly awarded and employable graduates. Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ) data (2011-2013) indicate outstanding levels of satisfaction with the course, with 85% of students satisfied with the overall
course experience. Of more significance, from the CEQ given the emphasis on team building skills, is the 'generic skills' score of 93% (CEQ, 2013), indicating exceptional levels of satisfaction and preparedness for careers.

Administered by the Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance, the Queensland Clarion Awards are the state’s most prestigious journalism awards for excellence. From 2009 to the present, the degree has produced five Clarion award winners and runners-up in 2009, 2011, 2012 and 2013. Students have also won Ossies, an Australia, New Zealand and South Pacific-wide award given to students for outstanding journalism work by the Journalism Educators Association of Australia.

The Graduate Destination Survey also indicates high levels of student employment with over 70% of graduates securing full-time positions. This past year, three graduates found employment as reporters for the Gladstone Observer and Charters Towers’ Northern Miner a month before their formal March graduation. Two others found work within a month of graduation and are now working for the Queensland North Register and The Ayr Advocate. That these graduates have opted to stay and work in regional Queensland newspapers and media is also testimony and validation of JCU’s strategic intent of improving the lives of people and societies in the tropics.

My contribution to Journalism education has also been well recognised by my peers at other universities in Australia and overseas.

Amy has helped me to be the best journalist I can be over the past three years, eventually playing a large role in landing me my first full time job as a reporter this month. She pushed me to enter my work in to the 2013 Ossie Awards where I won highly commended for a profile feature piece I wrote (Laura Mckee, BMJ graduate 2014).

I have been out of university for over 2 years ... [Amy] recently helped me secure employment within the local radio station. Dr Forbes has been a great influence on my career and I cannot thank her enough for everything she has done (Ben Johnson, BMJ graduate 2011).

This year, I was awarded a JCU Citation for Outstanding Contribution to Student Learning for my work developing and delivering the University’s Bachelor of Multimedia Journalism degree. I am proud to have contributed to the goals of two professions – journalism and academia – that I have loved and been part of for the last thirty years. My commitment to teaching, learning and innovation remains strong as I face new and exciting pedagogical challenges and opportunities in nurturing and guiding my students in their journey to becoming professional journalists.

REFERENCES

