

'Are you listening ... are we learning?'

Radio production as a means of teaching and learning

case study

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Abstract

This case study focuses upon one aspect of undergraduate teaching and learning within a 'Research & Development' unit of BA (Hons.) Media Production degree. Eight final-year students undertook the mentoring, teaching and development of a schools radio project. The paper seeks to develop two key themes: firstly, an evaluation of the usefulness of undergraduate learning via the development and management of an external project suitable for broadcast; secondly, an examination and analysis of the application and adaptation of prior learning during the mentoring process. The latter theme draws particularly from the strategies and metacognitive processes employed by the students.

Keywords

Media
motivation
radio
reflexivity
student learning

Introduction

The inclusion of an external, community or 'real client' project within the fields of media and communication studies is reasonably commonplace. However, many exercises have tended towards students making documentaries *about* or promotional materials *for* a client group. Rather fewer seek to develop programmes in true collaboration with a group. The following study sets out to assess the impact of project mentoring on student learning and skill acquisition. Although literally a 'snapshot', the hope is that it will prompt further and wider-ranging research into the use of 'mentoring and teaching' as a useful form of improving student learning.

Context

The syllabus of the Research & Development module requires students to

cover a range of professional media skills including the application of research skills leading to the creation and development of a well-presented project proposal that includes considerations of audience, sponsorship, financial, technical and distributive planning.¹

The second semester unit provides two options for all students studying broadcast media:

1. University of Lincoln (2001), 'Research & Development', Unit Guide.

- Research an idea for an original script for a media production and from analysis of the information you have gathered, develop an outcome in the form of a proposal and script for submission to a chosen commissioning body or broadcaster.
- Produce a research case study into an organization within the media industries e.g. Exhibitor, Distributor(s), union, public body, broadcaster, regulatory body, Production Company, commissioner, service provider, support service, supplier or independent sector.

Research problem

After a number of years marking student evaluations and collecting both written and verbal feedback on the unit, it was clear that many students welcomed and enjoyed the opportunity to analyse all aspects of their R&D practice in detail. Equally, as the following quotations make clear, for many other students the unit provided a very negative learning experience.

The unit was just about producing a good idea that doesn't make it through to realization and thus just a paper exercise and a waste of time.

Having to complete a similar R&D dossier for each semester was just pointless repetition.

In the first instance, there is a discernible sense of frustration and lack of fulfilment. Given that the degree is predominantly vocational in nature, this is perhaps a little unsurprising. However, even within good to excellent examples of work, a significant number of students appeared simply not to relate the significance of research and development skills to their work within practice units. One possible interpretation of this suggests that for some students, 'learning was little more than something done to them by teachers rather than as something they do to, or for, themselves' (Gibbs 1992: 5).

The second criticism, repetition, is almost never present within the personal evaluations from practice unit assessments, despite the fact that units are similarly constructed to produce a similar piece of work each semester. Notably, whilst the students' personal evaluations from the practice units reveal a significant amount of reflection on both process and content, in contrast, the equivalent R&D evaluations tended to focus upon the more general aspects of the unit. The 'diaries and logs' for example, were barely descriptive, reflective or indicative of tutorial discussions. The impression was that many were compiled literally at the 'last minute'. Gibbs, building on the work of Marton and Säljö (1976, 1984), has suggested that with a 'surface approach' to learning the 'student reduces what is to be learnt to the status of unconnected facts to be memorised. The learning task is to reproduce the subject matter at a later date' (1992: 2). Although Gibbs refers particularly to the written examination process, it fits the overall impression that for some, the opportunity to repeat and improve the R&D process was now at best a 'check list' assignment, providing scant evidence of prior or developed learning.

To summarize, the various articulations of student experience suggested a lack of motivation and engagement raising questions as to what extent effective and useful learning was taking place. The 'innovation', set out below, attempts to provide a model that addresses this problem by refocusing the R&D task without significantly altering the specific learning outcomes and the assessment criteria.

Description of study

A third option or 'innovation' was introduced to students specializing in the radio strand only:

In teams of two students, research an external organization or group (e.g. school or community group) with the intention of producing and developing a series of three radio programmes for broadcast.² The team will manage the project as executive producers providing a mentoring role where required. The content of the radio programme must be presented and originated by the external group.³

The design of this 'innovation' took into account two key considerations:

1. Resources - access to a radio station

The University of Lincoln is fortunate to have a radio station and web-casting facility (Siren FM). This provides not only a professional broadcast outlet, but also the opportunity to combine community or external projects within student course work. In terms of repeating this case study elsewhere; it could quite as easily be undertaken as a purely web-based project. The university also supplied the media equipment required for each participating school.

2. Theoretical context

It was important in terms of designing the 'innovation' to consider my own approach avoiding what Cotton (1995) describes as 'functional fixedness'. As indicated earlier, motivation, reflexivity and evidence of 'deep' learning are the key elements under observation. Kolb (1984), Cotton (1995) and in particular Gibbs (1989, 1992) suggest that 'an appropriate course design' can foster a deep and reflective approach to learning. Gibbs suggests four key elements that are briefly summarized below:

- *Motivational context*: Students need to be involved in selecting what is to be learnt and plan how the learning should take place if they are to experience ownership of it.
- *Learner activity*: Students need to be active rather than passive. Doing is not sufficient for learning. Learning activity must be planned, reflected upon and processed.
- *A well-structured knowledge base*: It is vital that students' existing knowledge and experience are brought to bear in learning.
- *Interaction with others*: Studies have shown that the student who does the tutoring learns more than the student who is tutored, confirming

2. Limited to radio students for logistical reasons plus the group represented an ideal number for a small-scale experiment.
3. For the general requirements of the unit see Appendix I.

the everyday experience that the best way to learn is to teach (Gibbs 1992: 10-11).

The first three elements are arguably always fundamental to any teaching and learning considerations within a unit design. In terms of the motivational context for example, the innovation would require the students as producers to decide *what* was important, and *when* learning events would take place. This according to Gibbs (1992) provides a greater sense of ownership. The last element, interaction, is of key interest here, for it highlights a fresh and potentially useful approach. To mentor an inexperienced group to make radio programmes, the student must adopt a carefully considered approach based on well-informed research; a solid knowledge base to introduce concepts and skills; and good organizational and development skills to coordinate the project up to broadcast. Finally, in terms of guiding and adapting production ideas, the students would have to incorporate and develop a constantly reflective and evaluative approach.

Methodology

The small-scale nature of the study, the logistics of available time and teaching duties resulted in the adoption of a qualitative strategy. Initially, just two research methods were used: interviews and primary written texts.

Throughout the project each student team had a weekly 20-minute tutorial. These were written up during or straight after the meetings and were treated as unstructured interviews and the initial source of primary data. An assessed project dossier provided a second database of text-based primary material; this included the team's research, an evaluation of the research, logs/diaries and planning documents, a 3000-word project report and personal evaluations. My own research process remained covert until a difficulty assessing the data necessitated a modification to the methodology.

Case studies can often present complex pictures that resist simple interpretations (Walker, Lewis and Laskey 1996). In this example, the students' own personal evaluations seemed initially to suggest a marked improvement in terms of both a critical and reflexive approach. However, it quickly became apparent that the student critiques of their subjects' abilities (and the content of the subsequent programmes) tended to be considerably more reflective and evaluative than that of their own work. I was concerned, that whilst this was on the one hand an encouraging and positive outcome, it was on the other hand, not the primary focus of the study and perhaps a possible flaw in the design of the case study.

In contrast, the 3000-word reports were reasonably evaluative with similar issues emerging from all four student groups. However, occasionally, a lack of detail or thorough explanation in one or two key areas tended to raise a number of unanswered questions. Therefore a *post facto* set of individual semi-structured interviews with the student participants was added to probe a little deeper. The discussions were based around

the main issues arising from the initial primary data. It was also decided to 'come clean' with the students as to the reason for the interviews. In retrospect, this may have been another flawed decision. It was evident that the students were quite protective of the project and less than critical at times. As Gill reminds us, in an interpretative study, the partiality of both the researcher and the respondents need to be acknowledged (1996: 31) and may in this case have weakened the validity of the study. One solution might have been to include the whole cohort in a panel discussion, creating a comparative rather than defensive response.

Introducing the innovation

Four teams of two students per team worked with three schools. The R&D project covered a 12-week semester. The programmes were broadcast in weeks 13, 14 and 15.

An introduction to the option, the assignment of teams to schools and a briefing by the tutor took place at week 1. The introduction to the school, children and teachers took place at week 2. An 'ice breaking' skills session including the pupils, teachers, students and the tutor took place at the university during week 3. From weeks 3 to 12 the teams worked in the schools. The student teams agreed access with the teachers introducing short, regular workshops called 'Radio Clubs'.

Data from my own tutorial records note a change from around week 6, when issues surrounding equipment and practice began to replace issues of research and project organization. Throughout the tutorials and ultimately within the final dossiers, comparisons with the previous R&D, the degree as a whole, issues of personal ability, disappointment and failure also emerged. Specifically, three issues dominated the tutorials, reports, diaries and critical evaluations forming the basis of the semi-structured interviews. These can be classified as comparative issues, research issues and practice issues.

1. Comparative issues

The students were asked to compare the experience of the R&D unit in both semesters:

To be entirely honest ... I think the deadline was week 12 in semester A. I think we started work in week 7 or 8. For this project it was impossible to do that, we had to maintain a constant all the way through.

During tutorials the student response tended to emphasize the comparative workload, indicating that the 'enforced spreading' of the work had been a less stressful and more useful in terms of reflection and development time. However, all four teams expressed the feeling that the workload was overall much higher than in the first semester unit:

The first R&D project we tried to make as real as possible; that was valuable but this was literally dealing with real people the whole time. We had a responsibility to make the project work. I know it sounds weird because it's my degree, but it really did feel like a job.

This suggested that the weighting of the workload was too high for the credit value of the unit. It became clear that the students themselves had unwittingly increased their own contribution beyond what was expected. In response to a direct question about the increased workload, it was evident that 'ownership' of the unit was a motivating factor:

It helped actually, being the final part of the degree; it helped being able to put into practice everything that we had learnt previously. It was great being able to decide as a producer and a mentor when things would be done and to see others develop as a result.

Furthermore, the dossiers and interview responses now began to cogently relate and connect the learning experience of the first semester to the process and content this time around. For example, in response to the question 'to what extent did this experience reinforce what you had previously learnt on the unit?' two students reflected upon exactly what this meant to them:

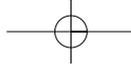
I think we learnt a lot in the first semester about the mechanics of how to research and develop and that's why a project like this is much better suited to the second semester. It was quite enjoyable in that we could take the more theoretical side from the first semester and sort of put it into physical practice if you like.

A very deep contrast: semester A was all research to the point of production, which was very useful to us. In semester B we went a stage further, so rather than repeat what semester A had done, it reinforced what semester A had done.

Although the projects were completed through to successful transmission, it was made clear to the students throughout, that it was not a requirement for the student assessment for the programmes to be transmitted. This allowed project failure to be an equally important part of the R&D learning experience. However, it was evident that a strong bond between the students and the host groups had been developed and this enabled some serious logistical problems to be overcome. One possible reading of this suggests that motivation and the feeling of ownership of the learning experience may have been an important impetus to practically overcome any adversity.

2. Research issues

The initial tutorials tended to focus upon deciding what research was important and where it might be found. The students were encouraged to develop a plan of action. When asked, 'What knowledge do you have already that will help you with the research task?' all the teams suggested that Ofsted reports, school brochures and material relating to social indicators would build up a picture of the cultural background of the school and its pupils.



We had to do a lot of research that we wouldn't have considered doing before. For example, the Ofsted report was quite negative in the way the government saw the school in its academic performance. That gave us the impression that we were dealing with pupils that aren't necessarily going to be committed. Normally, I don't assume something about people ... y'know 'judge a book by its cover'. However, the figures said one thing our experience said another.

To some extent all of the subsequent research reports tended to focus upon problems of this type of research outcome. The impression was that both the quantitative and qualitative data had tended to create an overarching 'snapshot' of the school and its community. Coupled with the fact that the reports were in some cases two or three years old, it clearly suggested that the material did not take into account either changes within the school, or the people within it. This research therefore tended towards an unfair representation of the school. The students had realized that some research doesn't always tell the whole story. Subsequently, during the semi-structured interviews the students were asked: 'What additional research had they undertaken?' and more pointedly, 'How did this research help in taking an approach to the project?' The responses revealed clear changes in at least two of the teams' thinking:

Our first area of research was to go into the school so that we had some kind of understanding of the background of the kids we would be working with. To be honest a lot of it came from the first couple of meetings ... to understand where they were coming from and to find out what they were interested in.

We researched other school radio schemes via attending conferences. To see how effective they had been. We then tried to incorporate, or learn from the ideas and solutions encountered in those schemes.

The first response reveals some useful primary research but a lack of a research plan. The second response meanwhile indicated that the additional conference research was extremely useful in developing a plan of possible ideas for content and programme structure, or in other words a common-sense 'avoid failure and learn from other mistakes' pre-emptive thinking strategy. With some irony, they regretted not undertaking a recognizance of the school:

I would have liked to go into the schools earlier to do some research into the school and what they were doing. Those chosen (the pupils) were chosen on the basis of a reward, this was not the best way forward.

Though the conference had identified that schoolchildren *must* have an intrinsic interest, this point was only brought home to the student team, when after four weeks, a couple of the pupils 'dropped out'. Only at this point did they discover the basis of the group. On the other hand, the



first responders regretted not taking a systematic approach to the research process:

It has taught me to look at things more in depth before I start doing the work and sort of try and plan more, because we sort of went straight on into it and worked it out as we went along. Whereas if I had taken a step back at the beginning and thought through what needs to be done, that would have helped to plan it better.

Whilst these examples indicate the value of mistakes as part of a learning experience, a final question asked the students to identify 'In what ways did this improve your research skills?' General responses suggested:

- collecting research, but more importantly the way it was used;
- making contacts;
- keeping the aims and objectives in mind when undertaking research.

More importantly, one student suggested that drawing generalized cultural assumptions from research was a salutary learning experience, which revealed a prejudice that impacted on other practice work:

Ofsted reports were used as a stepping-stone and I did write a few sweeping statements about the kids coming from council houses. This did unfortunately initially shape my approach to developing a programme. I probably did have a stereotypical view about them based on numbers and statistics. It's strange 'cause when I did the basic research for my radio project (a documentary), I was doing the same thing. I was told by the tutor but still didn't realize at the time. If I am serious about being in broadcasting then hopefully what I learnt from the research process is to remain objective.

3. Practice issues

The opportunity to work with a small group of pupils provided each student with the chance to be involved in some very basic tutoring and mentoring. It was hoped to test Gibbs' (1992) ideas concerning student tutoring as a means of improving learning - albeit in a very simple way. Within the early tutorials, all the students expressed confidence in introducing simple concepts, narratives and skills. From the outset it was hoped that this would encourage reflexivity about the students' own learning experience. The following examples are indicative of the general responses:

Despite all the stuff I had been taught as a student about making and thinking about radio, I realized I had to really re-think it, what radio meant, and make it relevant to them.

As a radio student it's easy to take the medium for granted. We are immersed in it ... doing projects an' all. We are taught in workshops to



think in sound pictures. So we dutifully do it and I suppose it all becomes somehow second nature. After two and a half years I really do think and hear soundscapes and mixes. It's a different story when you want others to do the same. You then think about what it really means and how you explain say to a group who are not media savvy ... You realize you have actually learned a language.

The process itself revealed some very simple but practical examples of metacognitive thought that looked to develop new strategies:

To begin with I think, the way that we actually talked about this was by answering two simple questions: What did we learn and how did we learn? Once we had thought about the solutions to those questions, it was a case of saying well OK we did things this way, but we're dealing with students 4, 5, 6 years younger than us.

The same responders introduced strategies that combined and utilized teaching and feedback methods they had been exposed to, including choosing examples of work that best expressed particular concepts:

We played them our own material to take them through the process. So for example we played something in a documentary style where there were lots of interviews. By actually going over the ground that we had covered ourselves as part of the course we were able to show it to the kids.

Although it could be argued that this indicates a simple case of regurgitation, additional strategies developed from the students' own research were also included:

We came up with an idea called 'Think Radio'. We wanted them to think about what they wanted to hear on radio. We know that they are really aware of television; all of their impressions and ideas had a TV feel to them. We told them to go home and watch television with their eyes closed to get some sort of idea of the sound. A few didn't do it but a few came back and said they noticed things.

Finally, questions about the mentoring experience exposed some of the students' personal weaknesses. The process had begun to develop a better sense of reflexivity:

This is going to sound really selfish, but mentoring and doing this project has told me more about what I thought I knew. Handling the production and the research and development wasn't hard in itself, but it exposed gaps in my knowledge and some prejudices about how I believe radio should be done. Some of the comments in an old (radio) project critique now make sense or rather I now understand what was put to me.



Conclusions and key features

The aim of the study reported here was to introduce innovation and evaluate a new approach in response to evidence of an unsatisfactory learning experience. In terms of the objective, the case study can only ever present a 'snapshot' and clearly lacks a truly quantifiable set of outcomes. The result of the data presented here suggests a positive learning experience for the eight students who took part.

Listed below are some of the useful outcomes of the case study:

- A motivational context allowed the students to combine the requirements of an R&D unit with the opportunity to work in a 'real-world' environment.
- There was a more even distribution of work over the whole unit.
- There was a practical context for the research and the evaluation of its outcomes.
- Some inspired examples of prior learning were adapted and incorporated into new and useful learning strategies.
- There was an improvement in terms of reflecting upon and evaluating a particular or set of learning experiences or situations.
- It provided an opportunity to focus and reflect upon not only the quality of learning, but also to some extent, the *nature* of quality in learning.

Overall, this case study has provided the impetus to continue, modify and develop the innovation. However, it has to be said that the outcomes could have been considerably different given a different set of circumstances. For example, what effect might a less than cooperative group or school had on the motivation of the student teams? The opportunity to find useful learning experiences from these situations needs to be considered and addressed, to avoid a return to the very issues that brought about this innovation in the first place.

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Appendix I

Specific tasks and requirements (amended):

- Teams are to carry out and *evaluate* research relating to group, (e.g. history, role within the community, social setting, curriculum issues, etc.).
- They should establish a clear research agenda and strategy together with an appropriate time scale.
- Teams must submit an outline proposal of their intended area and strategy of research for approval of the unit coordinator prior to conducting the assignment.
- Teams are to design/develop and supervise the training and technical production of the radio programmes.
- They should keep a log/diary.
- They should set out a research agenda in terms of commissioning and audience.
- Where appropriate, you should employ design elements, illustrations & primary research materials in your assessment evidence, (e.g. taped interviews and the monitoring of your own meetings as well as those of other parties).
- Team members are to produce an individual personal evaluation the learning outcomes with own project contribution identified. (It should feature their own learning outcomes/evaluation of proposal as well as those who are being mentored.)
- They should enable group to establish an idea for an original programme.
- They should enable group to devise the necessary writing products to formulate a detailed programme proposal. (Review, evaluate and modify it for final production.)
- They should enable group to devise and write treatment and draft script for the proposed programme. (Review, evaluate and modify it for final production.)