

Professional Perspectives: placing lived experience at the heart of journalism education

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Abstract: This paper will consider the importance of the blend of theory and practice in journalism education. It posits that in order to be equipped for a lifetime in journalism, students need to operate as reflective practitioners, with a well-formed sense of professional and personal identity. Now more than ever, in a post-Leveson landscape, they need to know who they are, what they stand for and to have their own individual 'voice'. Drawing on the example set by the BBC College of Journalism and my own doctoral research, for context, I also use a case study from my own teaching to illustrate the point: *Professional Perspectives* operates a programme of visiting speakers from industry that provides students with differing perspectives on current and key issues in journalism, such as ethics, original storytelling, impartiality. In the final assignment, students address a key challenge, placing quotes and ideas from the practitioners into a theoretical context supported by wider reading. In addition, they reflect on their own sense of self as a journalist. The paper will conclude that active learning from the lived experiences of others can enhance the lifelong education of journalists, informing their self-understanding and encouraging an ethical approach to their craft.

Keywords: self-reflexive; good practice; 'lived experience'; challenge; identity; self; ethics

One learns about education from thinking about life and one learns about life from thinking about education (Clandinn and Connelly, 1998:154)

This paper explores how stories of 'lived experience' are used in journalism education and how, through active learning from the storied selves of others journalists can reflect on their own practice. My background as a journalist, now working as a journalism educator has encouraged me to consider the role of personal stories in journalism education, since they are 'hard-wired' into journalism as a craft (Marr, 2004). This paper also aims to assess the utility of storytelling drawn biographically from personal experience in an educational context. It engages with the ways in which stories are told and re-told, so that both educator and students are involved in a learning process, which is immersive and interactive. For many journalists, the relationship between professional and personal identity is one of symbiosis: this paper posits that in

order to be equipped for a lifetime in journalism, students need to operate as reflective practitioners, with a well-formed sense of personal and professional 'self'.

This study is informed by the definition of self as core being. As Taylor (1989) reminds us, there is

a sense of the term where we speak of people as selves, meaning that they are beings of the requisite depth and complexity to have an identity (Taylor, 1989:32)

A sense of self is constituted by our interpretations of ourselves, which are never fully explicit (Taylor, 1989). Identity is taken to mean what we make for ourselves out of that concept of self, whilst aware that 'identities can no longer be seen as rigid categories' (Clarke, 1996:195). It is located in '*social order*, jointly maintained by organisms sharing a geographical-historical setting' (Erickson, 1975:46). Context and location are crucial to a sense of personal and professional identity.

### **Working lives and professional identity;**

One by one and two by two, the sober responsible men emerged from the main door again to go out for lunch: The Foreign Editor, the Literary Editor, the Diplomatic Correspondent and the Rugby Football Correspondent made up a party to share a taxi to the Garrick (Michael Frayn, *Towards the End of Morning*, 1967)

Frayn's (1967) witty observations of the male-dominated world of newspapers, with its long alcohol-fuelled lunches were mirrored in the working practices of broadcasting organisations at the time, where jobs for life were the norm. A life – long career in journalism often meant a lifetime in the same newsroom. Harold Evans uses the first instalment of his autobiography, *My Paper Chase*, to paint a picture of 'true stories of vanished times' (Evans, 2009). Visiting London from

Manchester, where he was a regional newspaper editor, in the mid-1960s, he describes Fleet Street as a magical place:

Nearly all the national newspapers had their headquarters in the street or nearby, with their presses roaring in the basements, the press barons barking in their penthouses ... and enough watering holes for a thirsty newsman, gossip diarist or cameraman to run from one to another without getting wet (Evans, 2009: 269-70)

In this personal account, he also describes a male-dominated environment, akin to Frayn's (1967) parody and a system of professional promotion, which resided in armchair chats, with jobs handed out, without interview, over a whisky. It was a cosy, clubbable world.

Autobiographical writing by journalists can usefully illustrate how men and women construct stories about themselves, both in the newsroom and in the field. For many, like former war correspondent, now TV anchor, Jon Snow, professional and personal identities are intertwined – inextricably – so that his own campaigning zeal informs his craft. Often hailed as a modern day George Orwell, Snow's autobiography, *'Shooting History'* (2004) is infused with a desire to change the world, to challenge inequality and unfairness, whilst reporting impartially for Channel 4 News. If journalism is defined as a craft, or even a trade (Marr, 2004) rather than as a profession, these examples from journalists' autobiographical writing illustrate how individuals seek to place themselves within their working world, cognisant of the constraints imposed by working practices and the remit of impartiality, but where 'self' as individual, as storyteller is also central.

In a contemporary environment dominated by short-term contracts, freelance shifts and 'portfolio careers', a journalist's professional identity is shifting dramatically. The research conducted by Mishler (1999) on the narratives of identity of craft artists shows how, rather than romanticising their craft, potters and artisans 'were keenly aware of "how the world is made" and tried to find

ways to continue with their work within that reality' (Mishler, 1999:161). The same could be said of journalists, keen to stay true to the craft of storytelling, but encouraged to diversify as a result of editorial constraints (deadline and the remit of impartiality) and economic imperatives (low pay and short-term employment in a digital age).

### **Changing perceptions of self-identity:**

Autonomy of journalists on the individual or organisational level does not necessarily translate to autonomy on the societal level that is needed for democracy to function (Ornebring, 2010;574).

As artists often feel removed from the reality that they are trying to reflect and to change, so for journalists there is often a gap between the democratic and romantic 'vision' of changing the ways in which people see the world and the reality of hitting ceaseless deadlines. Arguably, for journalists feeding the 24/7 news cycle, operating in a workplace where fewer reporters are producing more news, a sense of self is more important than ever. Moreover the journalist's self – identity in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is constructed against a backdrop of the intense scrutiny of critical friends from within the profession and, most recently, the fallout from the Leveson Inquiry and editorial failings at the BBC. In 2004, the political journalist, Andrew Marr (2004) depicted his 'trade' as affected by a crisis of trust and a tendency to exaggerate; Nick Davies' (2009) views on journalism's reliance on the churn of the PR industry are well - rehearsed. In addition, the digital landscape has led observers to question the viability of impartiality and objectivity:

Invented in an age of information scarcity, their relevance in an age of information abundance is now being questioned. Does a neutral voice hold the same value today as it did a century ago? (Sambrook, 2012:3).

Even stalwarts of impartiality within the BBC such as its Director of Global News, Peter Horrocks, have subjected this key tenet of its journalism to critical scrutiny

and called its relevance into question (Horrocks, 2012). After 2012, many observers feared that the double impact of the publication of the Leveson Report and the Savile crisis at the BBC could induce cowed and risk - averse journalism (Thomson, 2013; Laville, 2013). These fears are particularly pertinent within a media environment, where journalists operate across platforms and where movement between jobs and roles is more fluid than before. The cultures of the press and broadcasters could arguably become less distinctive as a result and a lifetime in journalism would lack colour as well as job-security. Post – Leveson, the spotlight is on journalism education, implying a heightened sense of responsibility (Frost. McKay, Temple and Allan, 2012; Greenslade, 2012). Now more than ever before, journalists need to know who they are, what they stand for and to have their own individual voice. For some observers, re-imagining journalism education is the priority:

Only by rethinking and re-invigorating journalism and journalism education will it be possible to institutionalise journalism as a profession that is equipped to fulfil its societal task (Donsbach, 2010:47)

They argue that journalism education should be seen as the standard bearer for good practice, as Roy Greenslade observed on his *Guardian* blog:

While the next generation of journalists may take ethics seriously, their bosses may not. That's the challenge for Leveson – to come up with a way to build a new ethical foundation for our journalism that overcomes the reality of newsroom pressures (Greenslade, 2012).

This acknowledges the roles that newsroom cultures and professional contexts play in an individual's life and, raising questions of ethics and informing good practice. The future of journalism would appear to rest with the journalists of the future and this presents a challenge to their educators (Greenslade, 2012; Frost 2012).

## **Sharing stories, self-reflection and good practice:**

In the end, journalism is an act of character (Kovach, 2001:230)

This paper builds on the concept of critical reflection as an important element of journalism education and the point at which journalism practice and journalism theory meet. Critical reflection is a prerequisite for understanding because it "is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (Kolb 1984:38).

Gone are the days when journalism education or training could focus solely on practice. It is no longer sufficient to teach the practical skills (both technical and conceptual) without reference to the academic debates that circulate around journalists, their place in society and principles they have always held sacrosanct (such as impartiality). If a professional practitioner is defined as 'a specialist who encounters certain types of situations again and again' then the specialist's awareness of self, or 'knowing in practice' becomes 'increasingly tacit, spontaneous and automatic' (Schon, 1995:60). This can lead to complacency or narrowness, the sort of 'I know it when I see it' view of journalism: a practitioner's outlook could quickly become narrow and jaundiced. A lifetime in journalism lived well, should seek to avoid ennui. Through reflection, a practitioner can embrace critical analysis and re-learning, looking at things from a different perspective and bringing a freshness of approach. Whilst it is important to avoid narcissism and excessive naval-gazing, 'there is a constant need to reflect on one's work, what one is trying to achieve' (Moon and Thomas, 2007:7).

Research conducted for my doctoral thesis, *The Storytellers Tell Their Stories: The Journalist as Educator* (2013) indicates that the use of stories in journalism education can provide a route to 'good practice'. Here, the concept of critically reflecting on and sharing lived experiences that are believable, that are authentic (and, as one participant observed, 'credible') and translating them into

something 'useful' can inculcate good practice in others. Each of the participants in the study, which focused on practitioners who had become educators at the BBC College of Journalism, defined themselves through journalism practice (Usher, 2000) and contributed to a set of conclusions about the role of lived experiences in journalism education. These are some of the themes that emerged in conclusion:

### **Stories that are useful and credible:**

Crucially, all of the participants acknowledged that not everyone is able to engage in or is suited to this method of teaching by sharing experiences. The simple act of telling and re-telling stories is not sufficient; it has to be a product of reflection on self-identity (Schon, 1995). It is not about sitting on a stool and telling 'war stories' since it involves the development of principles that have emerged over time as a result of practice. The notions of utility and credibility and the awareness of the importance of audience articulated by all of the journalism educators that I interviewed arguably mitigate the danger of falling into the trap of self-indulgence.

As a journalism educator, a deconstructed personal experience cannot simply be imposed on others in the shape of an anecdote because it is important to consider how it might be received, just as a journalist should consider the audience in reporting news stories. Awareness of the role of others is central to the ways in which an experience might be translated to make it useful. Stories are not simply re-told, but analysed and interrogated into a format that others can learn from – they have to be useful and to manifest 'learning points'. Given the inquiring nature of journalism, journalists are unlikely to learn from a 'top down' or directional style – involvement in the process, the sense that 'we are all in it together' in an interactive and honest exchange of experiences (as newsroom cultures are ideally based on the sharing of ideas) can create a credible, useful educational experience for educator and student. There is authenticity here, a fit between journalistic practice and educational practice. One participant reminds us that good journalism should avoid imposed

narratives and should aim to tell stories where the evidence 'speaks for itself'. Self – reflexivity is core to 'good' journalism and to 'good' journalism education.

### **Critiques of bad practice:**

Encouraging students to critique examples of 'bad practice' provides another method by which journalism educators can share their own principles derived from practice that have emerged over time. For one participant, a foreign correspondent, this is manifested in a critical analysis of the writings of others, through the prism of his own experience as a writer to elicit 'rules' or codes of practice for 'good' writing as an educator (in this context, news reports and features.) The students engage in a process of critical analysis of the stories of others in written form to develop their own approach in conjunction with the experiences that the journalism educator shared with them. For some journalism educators, the vocabulary that they use to teach others is developed through a sense of self, rather than direct experience. At these times, they see themselves as 'coaching' or 'facilitating'. When they are teaching values, which are intrinsic – such as *impartiality* – the examples come from their own experience as editors and producers and from the vocabulary that they have devised to work with reporters and correspondents – from direct and indirect experience. One participant felt that sharing her own experiences 'brings to life' a personal sense of ethics. Another used storytelling to teach impartiality as, what he termed, an 'active value'.

Where the educators are teaching 'what they do' the master/apprentice construct provides a useful model for the application of experience to journalism education. This is particularly evident in the approach adopted by the correspondent teaching writing skills: He defined journalism as a craft rather than a profession that is fashioned through instinct and stated that the learning and acquisition of skills took place through 'informal apprenticeship', taught by those who draw on and share their own experiences.



### **Immersive and experiential learning:**

All of the journalism educators displayed a keen awareness of context; a recognition of the challenges facing journalism and a desire to shape the future by inculcating 'good practice.' They do not seek to impose models of good practice, based on rules and codes, and the educational value of an immersive, experience-centred approach could be questioned on this basis - as one notes, there are no obvious, tangible 'intended learning outcomes' that can be written down. The sharing of lived experiences in an educational context flirts with the realm of therapy, it is transactional and immersive and highly personalised. However, none of the interviewees hold themselves up as role models, even though they might be perceived in this way and some students might draw aspirational modes of conduct from the experience, it is not an intention of the educators. They all manifest a passion for the craft of journalism, which is projected onto the education of others and in this sense they lead by example. But it is not a blind passion, one participant articulates a sense of tiredness about the state of journalism and the impact that 'bad' journalism - journalism that lacks trust, that is based on flimsy or faulty evidence - can have on people's lives. For some, there is a feeling of dissonance and a sense that connectivity must be restored with each offering different approaches to routes out of the mire, but they are all driven by a sense of social responsibility and the desire to 'give something back'.

All of the participants care about inculcating good practice: For one, whose passion is data journalism, it is important to focus on 'changing the prejudice' and 'breaking habits' with a return to evidence - based storytelling, rather than assumption - led journalism so that the standard approaches are overturned. Others seek to break down conventions through encouraging journalists to ask 'disruptive' questions and so attain originality in their storytelling. Another seeks honesty and fairness through the recognition that journalists are part of the stories that they tell, they can report with an impartial, fair-minded and honest approach to the lives of others. This is particularly challenging in conflict zones, where the concept of impartiality is complicated by the experience of bearing

witness and the journalist's craft is thrown into sharp focus. Sharing these 'uncomfortable notions of self', as he calls them, with honesty, acknowledging that identity is shaped by the stories that journalists report - in this case stories of conflict, often partially 'known' as a result of the fog of war - can provide an exemplar, which usefully illustrates good practice in journalism and in journalism education.

***Professional Perspectives: a case study:***

My research into the ways in which journalists use stories of 'lived experience' as educators informs my own approach to journalism education. This case study is intended to show how I utilise my own professional practice and background as a journalist to deliver a unit, for final year undergraduate multimedia journalism students, which focuses on employability. It encourages students to consider the importance of a self-reflexive approach to jobs and career opportunities.

*Professional Perspectives* aims to develop critical reflection on journalism practice and through a visiting speaker programme it engages students with practice in a theoretical context. The final assignment urges them to debate current challenges and issues in journalism within a conceptual framework.

***The Programme of Study:***

The unit is divided into two parts: the first five weeks are comprised of employability workshops, which are interactive and focus on the key skills that third year journalism students need at graduate entry level in a competitive workplace. These range from advice on social media usage and online profile to lessons from industry professionals on how to pitch ideas in order to get them commissioned. The workshops complement the students' research for their final major project, where they have to pitch an idea, develop it, produce and publish it as an online multimedia piece. The remainder of the unit is devoted to a weekly class, where a visiting speaker from industry shares 'lived experiences' and ideas with the students in an interactive session, which assumes a 'press conference' format. The classes are structured so that they address current

issues in journalism. The programme of study is designed to provide an iterative experience for the students: the first session sets out the key issues for debate to provide a context. For example, in 2013/14, the post-Leveson landscape highlighted issues around ethics and trust, original and creative storytelling, investigative journalism and reporting conflict. The importance of developing an individual 'voice' is also explained within the context of the challenges presented by 'an autobiographical age' (Plummer, 2000), where journalists are expected to put more of themselves into their reporting. This section from the unit guide provides an example of how the biographical details of speakers are shared with students to set up the session:

**Week 6: Martin FEWELL: *The Only Way is Ethics:***

Martin is former Deputy Editor Channel 4 News and has been Head of Communications, Metropolitan Police since September 2012. Martin started his career at the BBC at Radio Solent before moving to BBC Radio 4 News and Current Affairs, where he was deputy editor of *The World at One*. At Channel 4 News, Martin championed the programme's original journalism, presented by award-winning anchor Jon Snow. He wrote a submission to the Leveson Inquiry for C4 News. A team player and a highly intelligent editor, Martin will discuss ethics, trust, police-media relations post-Leveson as well as providing insights into the arguably the most impressive news operation in the UK (Channel 4 News) and testing your ethical prowess.

The teaching method is experiential and interactive, with each of the visiting speaker sessions following a similar format of an hour of 'lecture', with slides, clips of video and audio, online examples followed by an hour of questions. The students ask questions and ignite debate. Sometimes there are interactive exercises, for example one speaker, Becky Milligan from BBC Radio 4's *PM* programme, illustrated her talk on the importance of original approaches to storytelling with audio clips from interviews that she had not yet broadcast. The students were able to discuss issues of emotional journalism, taste and decency and ethics within the 'safe' classroom environment, whilst drawing lessons from her own experiences and her own 'take' on how she would approach these challenges. These were dynamic examples from of her own experience, distilled and focused so that the students could engage with the issues and reflect on their own practice. In order to present this class, Becky had reflected on her own practice to find learning points that she could share. In turn, through examples of

things that work and some that didn't, she involved the students in an exchange of ideas, through which they in turn reflected on their own practice.

In Martin Fewell's session, "*The Only Way is Ethics*", which ran in the weeks after the publication of the Leveson Report, the students worked together, guided and facilitated by him, to devise their own code of ethics for journalists.

This is the code that they produced in a workshop in 2012:

### **'The Only Way is Ethics' – A Code for Journalists**

1. Always act for the public good: a) audience b) interviewees
2. Always act in the national interest
3. Honesty
4. Balance/objectivity
5. Law – abiding
6. Accuracy
7. Protect the rights of minors
8. Protect sources
9. Perform to a 'gold standard' which is examined/endorsed (NCTJ)
10. Do not intrude into the grief of others
11. Check sources carefully
12. Protect privacy
13. Scrutinise government
14. Expose corruption
15. Do not mislead – the importance of truth
16. Fairness
17. Do not plagiarise
18. Do not cause harm

Devised by third year BA (Hons) Multi Media Journalism students at  
The Media School, Bournemouth University.  
Tuesday February 28<sup>th</sup>, 2012.

The students place their code into the context of regulatory codes and editorial guidelines produced by OFCOM, the (former) Press Complaints Commission and the BBC. They also engage with ethical concepts based on moral philosophy and utilise the applied ethics that they have already studied earlier in the course, integrating these with the visiting speaker sessions to reach their own judgements. The aim is to expose them to the blend of theory and practice, to encourage them to operate as reflective practitioners. The production of news is an instant and immersive activity, so it is important that journalists understand the thought – processes, attitudes and personal values, which shape the story. This chimes with Shon's (1995) notion of 'knowing-in-action', the opportunity to

reflect on the knowledge of practice. The stated aims of the unit, published in the student guide are to:

- Review the multi media concept against the background of regulatory and technological change;
- Establish a reflective overview of concept and practice of journalism with particular reference to ethical and professional issues;
- Review the concept and practice of journalism against the background of other national and international developments in the media domain;
- Provide an opportunity for students to engage with practitioners.

(Extract from the *Professional Perspectives* unit guide, 2013/14)

### Assessment and Feedback:

The workshops and visiting speaker programme support the production of a final piece of assessment – a case study of a key challenge in journalism. The assignment brief outlines the requirements:

In the light of the experiences of the Visiting Speakers and wider reading and research, write a case study of 2,000 words, which considers the challenges facing journalists under **one** of these headings: you devise the angle, there are areas of overlap, but it is important to define HOW you are tackling the challenge:

- **The journalist as original storyteller** – what is ‘original journalism’? The role of audience, impartiality, techniques of storytelling
- **The journalist as purveyor of truth** – ethics, compliance issues, trust, media ownership, investigative journalism
- **The journalist as responsible professional** – the exercise of power, sense of self and professional identity, relationship with sources, emotional journalism

The assessment and feedback for this assignment is informed by the criteria, incorporating journalistic core skills. It states that an exegesis blending theory and practice is a key requirement:

#### **Assessment Criteria**

Your assignment will be marked according to the following criteria:

1. The extent to which you have defined the challenge, which you have selected to analyse.

2. The extent to which you are able to give examples to illustrate your topic both from the Guest Lecture programme and your own reading and thinking.
3. The overall coherence of your arguments and structure of the case study
4. The quality of presentation, punctuation, spelling, grammar and referencing.

It is hoped and intended that these criteria are sufficiently broad and flexible to encompass a diverse range of approaches and individual arguments. The framework is provided by the three key challenges, but the students effectively set their own question or posit their own standpoint beneath the 'umbrella' title. The aim, as a tutor, is to convey the importance of respecting individual and diverse voices within the journalism profession through the assessment criteria. It is also hoped that the students will feel confident to reflect on their learning and to share a sense of 'self' through the case study. The other assignment for this unit – a portfolio of work from placement and a reflective essay – reinforces this and encourages the students to consider how their studies inform their practice.

*Student and industry feedback:*

The unit is evaluated with mid unit, qualitative feedback. The students have found this unit useful in developing their professional profile and in enhancing their employability. One student rep, writing on behalf of the 2013/14 cohort said:

The feedback we received on the unit was that everyone really enjoyed the guest speakers and found them all to be interesting and relevant to our future careers. I also know that fellow students found it helpful to have to put together a portfolio for this unit, as it was something we would need for future interviews etc.

The Careers Forum held at the end of the unit, at which alumni and industry speakers share opportunities and experiences is very popular and supports the assessed work aimed at developing their own individual 'voice'. This is noted as a mark of good practice by the programme team in its annual report reflecting on the academic year:

The students respect the importance of employability initiatives and the quality of visiting speaker programmes and the Careers Forum.

Source: 2012/2013 ARFM for BA (Hons) Multi Media Journalism, Bournemouth University

In his June 2011 report, the external examiner from industry, Pete Clifton executive news editor of msn said that 'the focus on future careers for the students is also very striking'. In 2012, he held up the Professional Perspectives case studies as an example of good practice:

I was very impressed by the Professional Perspective Programme. The quality of the work produced by the students on the back of these presentations was good. The range of speakers was impressive and the topics discussed demanding. But it was easy to see how much the students got from these sessions, and I really liked the way they weaved the insight from the speakers into their written pieces.

### **Journalism as craft-artistry**

Journalism education has got to get across that journalism is different. It's a very specific, closely defined thing (Marsh, 2012).

This statement by Kevin Marsh, the former editor of the BBC College of Journalism, supports the notion of journalism as craft artistry, a thing that is made. In order to create something of value (accurate, fair, trusted) journalists need journalism education to imbue them with a sense of confidence. The multi-layered experience of learning through stories drawn from the lived experiences of others in that 'safe place' of a classroom environment can have a powerful effect. Removed from the competitive and deadline – driven context of the news room (Davies, 2004), individuals can reflect through interacting with an experiential, therapeutic form of education, on how they are personally affected by the culture of the workplace. Their understanding of self and -- in tandem with this self-reflexive process - of key tenets of journalism practice - can be heightened, as the journalism educator is also continuing to learn about 'self' through sharing personal experience with others.

## **Conclusions:**

We are all tellers of tales. We each seek to provide our scattered and often confusing experiences with a sense of coherence by arranging the episodes of our lives into stories (McAdams, 1993:11).

As journalism is a human activity, so good practice in journalism could be encouraged by the exercise of an approach to journalism education, which centres on the narratives of identity of journalists who are aware that they are shaped by the experiences they share within an educational context, which in turn shapes the personal and professional identity of student and educator alike. Active learning from the lived experience of others can enhance the lifelong education of journalists, equipping them for a lifetime in journalism through informing their self – understanding. This virtuous circle of learning about self through the lived experiences of others does not allow for the construction of a specific educational model, predicated on learning outcomes but it does indicate that good practice and a pride in the craft-artistry of journalism could be inculcated through placing the autobiographies, the storied selves, of self-reflexive practitioners at the heart of the learning experience.

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