Developing Critical Citizenship: proposals for a postgraduate module on Community Media

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Introduction

Community media have often being described as the 'voice of the voiceless' (Lewis and Jones, 2006: 13) and all those groups ignored by mainstream media. With London Metropolitan University having one of the most mixed student bodies in the country and also due to its widening participation strategies, there are also plenty of adult and part-time learners coming from a variety of social and ethnic backgrounds. The topics covered in the proposed module could give those students the opportunity to discuss the use of community media outlets as a tool to develop communications in their local communities. A series of Guest Lectures in existing modules has already raised interest by a small group of students who have started collaborating or developing small community media projects in their own communities in North London (Barnet and Walthamstow).

This paper outlines proposals for a postgraduate theory-based module, *'Community Media: history, theory, context'* that is to be twinned with a practice-based module, *Community Media Production* (in the subsequent semester), where students will be able to apply the critical skills and theories learnt here to an audio/video or internet community media project to be developed in small working groups (up to 4 students) and 'produce work which is informed by, and contextualised within, relevant theoretical issues and debates' (QAA, 2008: 14). Both modules will be part of a planned MA in Community Media.

Aims and assessment

The module will address also two areas that are currently at the forefront of UK's Higher Education Policy: 1) educating students for the 'knowledge society' by developing their critical skills in the theory module and their media literacy and production skills in the practice module; 2) make them aware of the consequences of internationalisation and globalisation, specifically in terms of media ownership and political economy of the media.

With reference to the QAA benchmarks in the areas of Communications, Media, Film and Cultural Studies, among other objectives this module aims to develop:-

- ‘an understanding of the development of media and cultural forms in a local, regional, national, international or global context’ (QAA, 2008: 10) with an emphasis on community media;
- ‘an understanding of the processes linking production, circulation and consumption’ (ibid.5)
- in terms of social and political citizenship skills, ‘analyse the role which community and participatory media forms may play in contributing to cultural debate and contesting social power (ibid.)

Particular attention will be paid to:

1. the growing body of critical media theories that have recently developed in media studies;
2. the importance of developing critical awareness of media institutions and their development, including the influence of cultural elites (e.g. Public Service Broadcasting 1930s-1970s);
3. encouraging students’ self-directed learning by proposing alternative media outlets based in their communities in their projects (group coursework).

As the proposed module would be a theory-based one, the main learning tools will be books, electronic databases and a range of community media websites. Due to the participatory nature of this medium, many publications are also available in open access platforms, so students will be able to download them legally free of charge.

While the institutional virtual learning platform *WebLearn* will contain content such as the lectures and weblinks and include the submission of assignments, a blog will be used to discuss topics raised during lectures and seminars and include links to multimedia content in a more ‘user friendly’ environment (more details below).

The assessment will be based on three pieces of coursework:

1. A 2000-word report, due in Week 9, that will analyse a case-study of community radio, drawn from either published or contemporary audio sources, using the theory covered in the course. Students will be given a formative feedback that will be useful to develop the second assignment.
2. A 3000-word essay, due in Week 14, where the concepts explored and discusses throughout the module will be analysed in the wider frame of communication as a tool for development, communication as a human right and global social movements.

3. Weekly group presentations from Week 6 to Week 10, where project proposals for a community media outlet will be collectively evaluated and discussed. This will lay the basis for the subsequent practice-based module.

Pedagogical Approach

The module will combine a mix of theoretical perspectives and the discussion of a series of relevant case studies, ending with a final module review session. Theory will cover characteristics of mainstream media to which community media are a response, theoretical concepts which underpin community and alternative media, a brief historical review and the context of the current UK community radio sector. Case-studies will be drawn from published sources and contemporary projects.

Where opportunities of attending events in the London area, either with free entrance or the payment of a small fee, will arise in the course of the module, the convenor will encourage the students to attend and eventually report back to the class. This might give them the possibility to get in touch with the reality and the current issues of the sector, and enhance their analytical skills.

Due to the nature of the subject, the socially critical approach (as in Toohey 1999: 63-66) seems to be the most coherent choice to develop the discussion and enhance the learning processes in this module. Toohey has described this approach as aimed to 'develop a critical consciousness in students so that they become aware of the present ills of our society and are motivated to alleviate them' (ibid. 63). Therefore space will be also given to critical accounts of the media (Couldry and Curran 2003; Downing 2001; Curran 2002; Atton, 2004 among others) to stimulate discussion and critical abilities of the students in analysing media's political economies and structures of power. In doing so, students will be also discussing how access to the media has been conditioned by historical, social and political contexts. In line with Toohey' s description of this approach, the process of learning will engage teachers and students together in 'understanding and critiquing social institutions' and 'work on collaborative projects which have some social significance' (Toohey, 1999:64), namely community-based websites, in the twinned module designed to skill them also with required technical knowledge.

Given that not all of the students, either coming from BsC Media Studies or from non-media degrees, might be familiar with study of mainstream media, their structures of power and production processes, these topics will be explored and discussed in the first two weeks, then moving to community media and their different dynamics of media production characterised by local and participatory processes starting 'from below'. However, as media scholar Hochheimer (1993) has lighted in a landmark article on the subject, community media are not exempt of problems and issues that arise with the management of democratic structures (e.g. 'who speaks for whom'?). Moreover, as in the case of Rwanda in the 1990s, in the absence of proper policy and regulatory frameworks, radio stations might contribute

to spread hate speech. Consequently, the module will include the discussion of such issues and contribute to the development of a critical attitude also to community media.

Drawing on Freire's notion of *coscientization* (1972), the module will also explore the creative ways of using community media tools to enable students to question and critique current media practices, and bring everyday life into the learning process.

Elements from Malcolm Knowles' experiential approach will also be considered as 'organising learning experiences (the curriculum) around life situations rather than according to subject matter units' (Knowles et al, 1984: 12 in Toohey, 1999:59) is considered to be important in this context. Students own experience of local media consumption and/or media bias towards their local areas/community will be explored and discussed during the module and the coursework will stimulate their capacities of designing alternative media platforms, criticise existing systems and, overall, stimulate them to take initiative in learning.

These aims will be supported the use of a purpose-designed blog for this module. The author of this report is the Editor of the website CommunityMedia.eu, an online resource that aggregates continental-wide information on research, teaching, policy and practice in this sector and can easily include a special section (only available to the students of the module) and has the advantage to categorize discussions and embed audio/video content in an environment that is more fit for purpose and easily customizable by the convenor, also taking into account suggestions and improvements suggested by the students.

Moreover, this platform might be closer to tools that they use in their everyday media production and consumption, as social networking platforms and so called Web 2.0 generation sites. Blogs are easier to set up, customize and manage and can include interventions from the invited guest lectures and other relevant key figures in the sector.

Students could also easily circulate relevant links to texts, as well as audio and video files and contribute to the accumulation of knowledge that will be used in their cohort and in the following years. Potentially, this tool could also accommodate communicative needs of part-time students and, contribute also to the development of student's media literacy skills. As the German media pedagogist Sebastian Fiedler argues

> *These tools offer a new and powerful toolkit for the support of collaborative and individual learning that adheres to the patterns of contemporary information-intensive work and learning outside of formal educational settings.* (Fiedler 2004, quoted in Downes, 2004: 18 [online])

In other words, the module blog can be used to engage 'with the content and with the authors of what you[students] have read' and be used for 'reflecting, criticizing, questioning, reacting.' (Downes, 2004: 24 [online]). The potential applications of his tool are well illustrated in the 'Matrix for the use of blogs in education' developed by the media educator Leslie Scott (Scott, 2003 [online], see appendix 1).

This theory-based module and its practice-based sibling will also draw from H,ther et al.'s of Action-oriented media pedagogy (AOMP), this being concerned with 'democratizing the structure of communication (…) as well as in using media as a means towards behavioural change and development of perceptive abilities through active and self-directed handling of media' (H,ther et al. 1997: 244 in G,nnel, 2006:42). As G,nnel herself describes, AOMP places the student 'as a self-responsible agent or social subject at the centre of its pedagogical efforts and research interests' and 'emphasizes the self-responsibility and sovereignity of individuals, who work actively with the media's messages and who can use or create media in order to articulate their interests' (ibid. 42-3). In this sense, the module blog can be used as a 'critical, reflective, creative and effective way' to analyse community media in their social contexts.

In the course of the module, while describing the constitutive elements of community media, the convenor will facilitate the discussion on the current media environments that the students use in their everyday life, the opportunities these give and the biases these might have towards their or other social groups (e.g. an event unfolding through the lens of regional/local and mainstream/community media). This will contribute to give them a more active role in the learning process from the beginning, aiming then to stimulate the discussion further in the module blog. Those students whomight have initial difficulties to overcome barriers of using a blog will be offered support during the contact hours available for this module, even though the user-friendly design of the tool should overcome this sort of problem.

In other words, being aware of diverse student intake of this institution, the student's situation will be take into account, in terms of their background and creative potential, to help to determine part of the shape of the module , 'adapt to the experiential world of the participants' and supporting them in 'achieving a confident and competent relationship to the media which play such an essential role in their everyday lives' (Schumacher, Kunz and Freund, 2003, in G,nnel, 2006:52).

The relationship with the media, and community media in particular, could lead to the introduction of a 'community media diary', viewing or listening a range of stations during a week, prepare a short critical overview of the output and link this to a set piece of reading, especially in the weeks where 'regional experiences' will be discussed (see Module Outline in the appendix). As Price-Davies has highlighted in his review of radio teaching,

> *Pragmatically this type of exercise has value in at least getting students to listen [or view] to types of programming they might not otherwise have heard [or seen], and to build some kind of mental map of the output available in the area.*
> (Price-Davies et al., 2004: 105)

Finally, the module will try to relate student's experience in the context of their 'real life' and make society's and its media institutions' contradictions part of the educational process.

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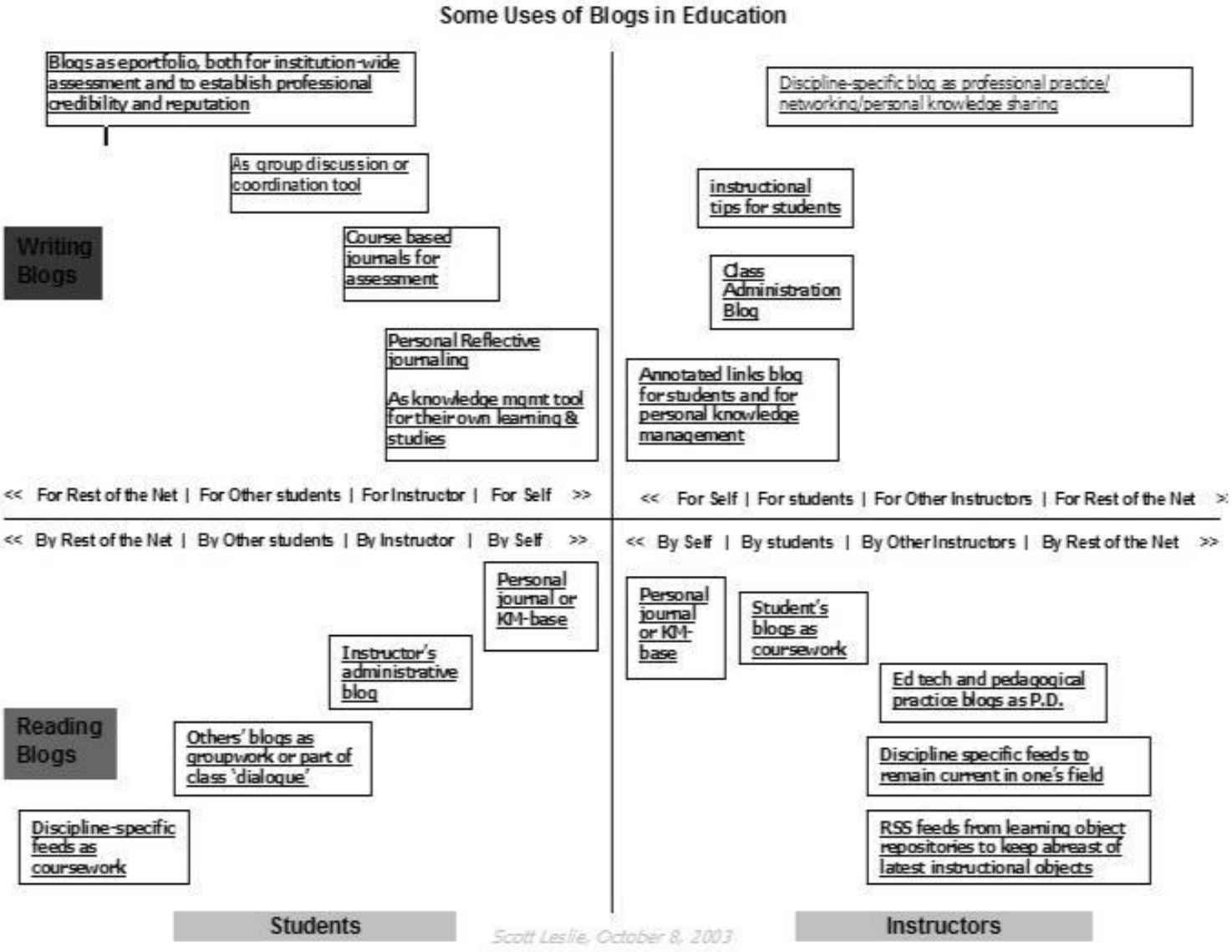
APPENDIX


Some Uses of Blogs in Education
Blogs as eportfolio, both for institution-wide assessment and to establish professional credibility and reputation
As group discussion or coordination tool
Writing Blogs
Course based journals for assessment
Personal Reflective journaling
As knowledge mgmt tool for their own learning & studies
Discipline-specific blog as professional practice/ networking/personal knowledge sharing
instructional tips for students
Class Administration Blog
Annotated links blog for students and for personal knowledge management
<< For Rest of the Net | For Other students | For Instructor | For Self >>
<< For Self | For students | For Other Instructors | For Rest of the Net >>
<< By Rest of the Net | By Other students | By Instructor | By Self >>
<< By Self | By students | By Other Instructors | By Rest of the Net >>
Personal journal or KM-base
Instructor's administrative blog
Reading Blogs
Others' blogs as groupwork or part of class 'dialogue'
Discipline-specific feeds as coursework
Personal journal or KM-base
Student's blogs as coursework
Ed tech and pedagogical practice blogs as P.D.
Discipline specific feeds to remain current in one's field
RSS feeds from learning object repositories to keep abreast of latest instructional objects
Students
Scott Leslie, October 8, 2003
Instructors