

The Storytellers Tell Their Stories: using stories of lived experience in journalism education

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Abstract:

Stories are 'hardwired' into journalism as a craft (Marr, 2004); this article explores how stories of 'lived experience', the personal stories of journalists, can play a credible and useful role in journalism education. Focusing on the BBC College of Journalism as a case study and using examples from in-depth auto/biographical interviews with journalists working there as educators, it analyses how 'self-stories' of experience from journalism practice can inform journalism education in an age that has been described as 'autobiographical' (Plummer, 2001). The inter-relationship of personal and professional identity is also considered, utilising the emergent concept of autobiographical journalism to scrutinise the role of self within the context of the newsroom and the classroom. The imperative to restore trust in journalism provides a crucial context and the article assesses the importance of personal stories in inculcating good practice. The interviewees highlight the importance of credibility and utility in sharing their experiences with others in a learning environment. It concludes that active learning from the lived experiences of others can enhance journalism education, informing students' self-understanding and encouraging an ethical approach to their craft, so that good practice and a pride in the 'craft artistry' of journalism emanates from

placing the storied selves of self-reflexive practitioners at the heart of the learning experience.

Keywords: journalism education; storytelling; lived experience; reflexivity

Introduction: stories of 'lived experience:

'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).

My own personal story led me to this conference presentation in Boston at the Media Education Summit in November 2015. A BBC journalist working for many years in news and current affairs, I am now a journalism educator and head of a J-School in the UK. This role has encouraged me to consider the place of stories of 'lived experience' in journalism education, since they are "hard-wired" into journalism as a craft (Marr, 2004). As a piece of biographical research, originally conducted for a doctoral thesis, it also considers the relationship between autobiography and journalism in an age, which has been described as 'autobiographical' (Plummer, 2001). Now journalists in Western society are seen as part of the story, embedded in the reality that they are reporting. From the 1830s onwards, when the chroniclers of Victorian society, Dickens and Thackeray emphasised the importance of people's daily lives in their journalism and novels, biographical detail has played a central role in journalism, which today thrives on human-interest stories and 'case studies' to breathe life and colour into news reporting.

Through interviews with a small group of practitioners who moved from the BBC newsroom to the classroom of the BBC College of Journalism to work as journalism educators, this article 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 student are involved in a learning process, which is immersive and interactive. As the self-reflexive journalist is aware that each news story is a product of 'self' and is mindful of audience, so notions of credibility also emerge as important for journalism educators, as well as a very strong sense that journalism is a 'craft', something that is definite and created, like a pot or a tapestry. Finally, the article posits that this pride in craft-artistry has inherent, additional benefits, giving the journalism educator a renewed sense of belonging in a profession battered by change and controversy (as well as a dramatically changed business model) and imbuing the journalists of the next generation with an understanding of good practice, of the potential for positive impact that resides within their craft.

Given the author's BBC background and the retrospective accounts of the interviewees, it would be reasonable to assume some misty-eyed sentimentality might distort the narratives. There may be an occasional whiff of nostalgia, but the accounts are self-reflexive and a positive effort was made to avoid 'friendship narratives' – whilst remaining aware that my own voice should also be heard. The article offers a snapshot of a period when journalism more widely was under intense scrutiny – criticised for being untrustworthy in the wake of the Leveson Report on 'phone hacking in the press – and when the BBC was emerging from the Hutton Inquiry only to

become mired in a new crisis inflicted by the scandal of Jimmy Savile. A response that underlined a commitment to educating its journalists in ethics and editorial values was shaped in the form of the College of Journalism, founded post – Hutton in 2004 and combining online resources with intensive classroom training for all staff. Those interviewed were all experienced journalists, editors, reporters and producers, involved in teaching at the College (which came to be known internally and externally as CoJo). This article presents selected contributions from in-depth biographical interviews.

Key challenges for journalism education:

‘The press provides an essential check on all aspects of public life. That is why any failure within the media affects all of us. At the heart of this Inquiry, therefore, may be one simple question: who guards the guardians?’

(Leveson, 2011)

This article is founded on the understanding that robust journalism plays a crucial role in a healthy public discourse (Habermas, 1991). One of the key themes that emerged from the conference was that the encouragement of critical thinking through media education enables people to become ethical, global citizens. The challenge for journalism educators is to produce the next generation of journalists at a time where public confidence has foundered and trust in the media is in decline. Journalism also faces some specific challenges, rooted in the nature of journalism practice itself:

- It is a highly human activity and, as such, it is challenging to teach.
- It is complex and needs 're-imagining' so that theory becomes more aligned with practice – journalism education is not simply 'training'
- It needs to avoid the dangers of excessive naval – gazing and tacit knowledge, so that journalists engage in an ongoing process of critical analysis and re-learning, mindful that 'there is a constant need to reflect on one's work, what one is trying to achieve' (Moon and Thomas, 2007:7).

The academic study of journalism, the theory, is more closely aligned with the practice than ever before. It is no longer sufficient to teach the practical skills (both technical and conceptual) without reference to the academic debate that circulates around journalists, their place in society and principles they have always held as 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. A practitioner's reflection can accommodate critical analysis and re-learning, looking at things from a different perspective and bringing a freshness of approach. Perhaps, for journalists turned journalism-educators the integration of personal experience into journalistic storytelling chimes with a cultural phase, which craves human interest and so encourages the development of a 'more inclusive and emotionally intelligent approach to human experience' (Coward, 2010: 243). This enables us to avoid the trap of narcissism by reflecting on our own

experiences to make them useful to our students when we share them. The focus of this research is on the experiences of the educators, the journalists, and there is still work to be done on how these shared experiences are received by students.

Historical and contemporary contexts also present challenges to journalism and journalism education, many of them already well-documented, but important to acknowledge:

- The collapsing business model of the press
- The deplorable newsroom cultures of some tabloids in the UK, scrutinised by the Leveson Inquiry and subsequent report (2011).
- A decline in public confidence and trust
- A burgeoning citizen journalism, social media, digitisation (Allan, 2010).

This research focuses on public service broadcasting, where the trust ratings are marginally better, but there are still challenges faced by a 'cowed journalism' (Thomson, 2013), a journalism that lacks confidence and originality (Horrocks, 2012; Yougov, 2010; Marr, 2004; Davies, 2009), so there is a need for journalism education (both in the academy and the training departments of news organisations) to restore the public's faith in journalism (Greenslade, 2012; Frost, McKay, Temple and Allan, 2012).

News organisations have responded in different ways. The BBC moved away from training and sought to bring journalists into the realm of reflective educational practice with the establishment of the BBC College of Journalism (Neil, 2004). Its key aim was to ensure that journalists within the corporation are trained to be 'fair and open-minded when examining the evidence and weighing all the material facts' as well as being 'objective and even handed in

(our) approach to a subject' (BBC Editorial Guidelines, 2008). The drive to reflect on practice has spawned media academies in other news organisations such as *The Guardian* newspaper. In the United States, 'J-Schools' are well-established and in the UK, over the past decade, there has been a consistent growth in the number and range of journalism courses offered by Higher Education institutions at undergraduate and postgraduate level, many seeking to combine the teaching of skills with an understanding of theoretical concepts.

"No ivy-clad quads"

'Journalists must be active participants in the burgeoning media literacy movement, taking advantage of our channels of communication to explain, justify and when necessary, apologise' (Stavitsky and Dvorkin, 2008:29-30).

The BBC College of Journalism provides a case study for this research, established in 2004, after the BBC had faced a major crisis in trust following inaccurate reporting on the issue of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq.

The key protagonists in this study are journalists-cum-educators who pioneered an approach to journalism education that moved away from training to adopt a style of teaching that encourages engagement and interactivity.

They provide rich data as intelligent and self-reflexive people who critically interrogate the world they inhabit. Hence, they have 'narrative competence', which is important in biographical research as it gives us 'the chance to create a relatively accurate match between their images created in their minds as we

try to understand their expressions' (Gudmundsdottir, 1996:293-4). I hope that their voices are heard here with clarity and integrity. The central focus is on the participants' responses to how journalists use 'lived experiences' in journalism education and whether they see them as useful. It embraces the core tenet of impartiality, which provides the remit for broadcast journalists to provide balanced, fairly represented journalism; this affords the subject (s) of their stories what the BBC defines as a 'due impartiality', in accord with notions of fairness and closely aligned to philosophical concepts of objectivity and truth. There is also an ethical sense of an authentic 'fit' for the project, so that I draw on personal experience as a journalist trained to be impartial. Aware of the dangers of producing 'friendship narratives', I sought to apply a self-reflexive research to the interviewing process, keeping a journal, whilst retaining my own voice and 'the right to say something that was mine' (Krieger, 1983). Writing for others is a collective and an individual act of recall (Coffey, 1999) and the act of remembering in a biographical interview 'is a mutual process, which requires understanding on both sides' (Thompson, 1988:135 in Roberts, 2002:148). The excerpts used in this paper are inevitably – even though the original research project was 'data-driven' - subject to my own interpretation, such is the nature of narrative inquiry.

Journalism as Craft-artistry

'The primary aim of my interviews with craft artists was to learn about how they come to their work; what it meant to them and how it functioned in their lives' (Mishler, 1999:21).

Mishler's (1999) work on the narratives of identity of craft artists was useful in approaching this research, whereby interviews with individuals about their work (in this case craft artists) illuminate questions of self-identity and social context. As the livelihood of his weavers and potters were threatened by standardisation and mass production, so the changing landscape of journalism presents challenges, through the rise of citizen journalism and the 24/7 news cycle, to journalists and journalism educators alike. One aspect of this research looks at the relationship between the journalist and his or her craft (journalism) and how this informs a sense of identity for educators sharing their 'lived' experiences – perhaps providing a means to feeling, once again, a sense of 'belonging'.

The Storytellers' Stories

'Lives and their experiences are represented in stories. They are like pictures that have been painted over and when paint is scraped off an old picture, something new becomes visible. What is new is what was previously covered up. A life and stories about it have the qualities of pentimento' (Denzin, 1989:81).

The research for this article utilised the key tenets of the biographical method, which centre on the construction of personal stories presented as auto/biographies, since these are 'conventionalised, narrative expressions of life experiences' (Denzin, 1989:17). Ultimately, 'the subject matter of the

biographical method is the life experiences of a person' (Denzin, 1989:13 - 14). Whilst not without its problems, the biographical method as a means to establish the "real" appearances of "real" people fits the spirit and aims of this study. It allows for a dynamic and immersive approach to accessing the experiences of others, akin to the mechanics of journalistic inquiry.

Stories are central to our lives and to our understanding of the world. Self-identity is inextricably linked to the way in which we talk about our lives and our experiences. For McAdams (1993), in autobiography, we construct a 'personal myth,' which is unique, a heroic story of self, giving coherence and meaning to our 'lived experiences.' Storytelling forms a vital component of the human condition, so that autobiography could be said to work on the 'assumption that the self and its experiences may somehow be represented in a text' (Eakin, 1999:99). The notion of a 'storied self' as providing an insight to experience, through telling a story and putting part of oneself into it also allows us access to the lives of others as told 'in their own words,' since 'through stories we relate our lives to ourselves and others, we attempt to make sense of our experiences and give an account of who we are' (Roberts, 1998:103). For some observers, the auto/biographical approach to studying lives is authentic, since storytelling is a natural human activity, learnt in childhood and developed throughout life:

'Biography has always directed us to the figure of a real person in all his or her peculiarity, accidentalness and actuality' (Lee, 2005:4).

Life can be depicted as a plot, which we narrate our way through in order to give meaning to our daily actions:

‘We live immersed in narrative, recounting and reassessing the meaning of our past actions, anticipating the outcome of our future projects, situating ourselves at the intersection of several stories not yet completed’ (Brooks, 1992:3).

It also engages with notions of memory, self and identity. The role of memory is crucial in a biographical study, as stories are the product of our ability to recall our earlier interpretations of past experiences. This is rarely an ordered, formalised process, it is ragged at the edges, since ‘images are not neatly stacked away in memory in a kind of “mental filing cabinet” waiting around to be placed in a narrative’ (Gudmundsdottir, 1996:224). It recognises the temporal quality of memory, which shapes and forms the stories that are told. As well as acknowledging the ethical issues of writing for others already discussed, the interview process needs to be sympathetic to the vagaries of our powers of recall and to incorporate the importance of time.

The definition of self as core being informs this study. As Taylor (1989) reminds us, the language used to describe ‘self’ is historically conditioned, but 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).

The notion of self, which connects to a sense of identity is characterised by the ‘crucial feature of human agency’ and ‘what I am as a self, my identity, is

essentially defined by the way things have significance for me'. A sense of self is constituted by our interpretations of ourselves, which are never fully explicit (Taylor, 1989:33-4). In auto/biographical texts the account of self is 'consubstantial' with who the participant is so that the researcher (and reader) can get as close to an actual experience as possible through the personal story. Facts about an individual's life such as background provide a context, which helps us to understand stories as told by a 'culturally understood self', a self that is grounded in a larger story (Denzin, 1989).

Identity is taken to mean what we make for ourselves out of that concept of self. The concept of self-identity is located in the 'personal order – that is, the integration of 'inner' and 'outer' world in individual experience and behaviour' (Erickson, 1975:46). Here, journalism educators also share their sense of professional and personal identities, highlighting the crucial importance of context and location. Identity is located in 'social order' (Erickson, 1975:46) and individuals are located within a 'social and cultural matrix' (Mishler, 1999: 16). Sometimes professional identity can act as a brake on the expression of deeper emotional discourse. This is applicable to journalists, trained to be impartial where 'the self of autobiographical journalism is restrained from excessive fabrication by the conventions of the profession' (Coward, 2009:244).

Our personal constructs are a vital part of our 'world-making' and narrative constitutes an essential method of understanding our own lives; we have no sense of self without a narrative (Ricoeur, 1992; Bruner, 1987).

Sharing stories can illuminate personal experience and understanding and can create a sense of community – once again, reminding us of that need to

'belong' in a fragmented, process and content-driven digitised world. The extracts from auto/biographical stories that are shared here are denoted by job title rather than names.

'Storied selves':

'The stories you tell are you, I am my story' – BBC Foreign Correspondent.

A BBC foreign correspondent, who also teaches news writing to trainee journalists, defines journalists as craft artists, whose craft is storytelling, which is instinctive. He echoes Marr's (2004) notion of stories, saying they are "hardwired into our system. Storytelling is like a song or dance":

"It's a fundamental way, an almost defining way of expressing yourself, of defining yourself as a human being. The stories you tell are you. I am my story".

This is central to his view of his craft and conveys with a direct simplicity how an individual journalist's lived experience or 'story' is defining of 'self': both the stories that he reports as a journalist and the life story that he possesses as his own biographical self. This dualism is powerful and suggests that journalism is the most human activity: 'self' is always present in the stories that are reported and for the journalism educator, 'self' is always present in the storied experiences which are shared with others, even if these are tailored to audience. As he points out, 18-24 year olds studying as trainee journalists are unlikely to grasp the full detail of some of his lived experiences,

so he has to 're-tell' them in a focused and targeted way for them to be useful as educational tools.

All digital journalists have to learn technical skills, but his interest is in inculcating something less tangible and less easily defined:

“There are also skills that are, I suppose more about attitude and philosophy and approach. You have to learn to listen. And how do you teach somebody to listen? You have to find that out for yourself”.

For this journalist, the sharing of 'lived experience' and learning from others by watching them represents a sort of apprenticeship, where the master craftsman, the experienced journalist shares good practice through doing his craft – that of writing and telling stories:

“These are craft skills but they're not a profession. There isn't training ... But you can learn them; you can acquire them; you can serve an apprenticeship in a way, an informal apprenticeship; and most of all, you learn from watching other people, asking yourself, 'Why was that?'"

He 'leads' his students through this 'informal apprenticeship' by drawing on his own experiences, using examples - but within a framework, as defined by the remit of broadcast journalists – including the key tenet of impartiality.

Craft artistry and campaigning zeal:

“Storytelling is fantastically important” – news and current affairs editor

A former BBC News and Current Affairs editor, now journalism educator, who set up the online learning resources for the BBC College of Journalism

describes storytelling as 'an increasingly underrated skill', partly because of the impact of the web and the drive to produce content. He seeks to place storytelling back at the centre of journalism as a craft, since mere content or web-based information "will never get traction, it will never get salience because, you know, it's not telling stories."

He defines his craft as 'separateness': the daily programmes that he led teams to create were distinguished by a 'separateness' which might be described as a purity, since "there's things that you're doing to make it separate from everything else in the world." As the potter sees his pot as a clearly defined entity, so he describes his programmes in the same tangible terms:

"It's defining everyday why I suppose like a potter defines why that pot is. There's a point where the universe ends and the pot begins. In the same sort of way there's a point where the world ends and the [programme] that you're making that day begins. And making a difference is kind of what it is all about, so there's separateness, certainly."

It is also a craft that is defined by complexity: the imperative of ethical context and the tension between 'truth and impartiality': "We're kind of building something that's complicated as a house, without the plans." The daily news agenda is constantly shifting, so each programme was bespoke, like a handcrafted single edition. As the craft artist resides in the final product – the potter in his pot, the reporter in his reporting - so the editor is closely aligned with the programme that is created and goes 'on air', but any reflection of personality is subconscious:

“To go back to the potter analogy, maybe the potter thinks that, when it’s my hands in that clay, then it’s the pot that’s going to come out, without consciously thinking that it’s your style.”

A focus on journalism education within the BBC has played a part in the refreshed appetite for storytelling, but there is a wider goal for the educator, which transcends any institutional remit: “Journalism education has got to get across that journalism is different. It’s a very specific, closely-defined thing’.” He believes that journalism educators need to disseminate the concept of journalism as more than information and facts or social media, as a clearly defined story telling, which verifies and provides salience:

“Having a band of people who you trust to go out into the world, go to places you can’t go to, get the access you haven’t got, to think about things in a way that you couldn’t necessarily think about then because you haven’t got the time to do it, to verify what they had...and to report back to you what they found and to do it in a way that captures the salience of the moment, that captures your attention, that tells you this is an important thing to be thinking about today and tells it in a story.”

Journalism is a profession; it is craft-artistry: “It’s a made thing. It’s not a force of nature. It’s a thing you have to make.” It is the role of the journalism educator to “stand up for journalism” and to take on “all the people who say you don’t need journalists anymore.” So it has campaigning zeal as well as clearly defined outcomes – telling a truthful and accurate story.

All of the journalists interviewed aspire to high standards for their craft, where the ambition is to create something of value (accurate, fair and trusted) and

they feel an association not unlike a potter to his pot or a weaver to her tapestry (Mishler, 1999). This article posits that there is craft artistry involved in journalism and notions of self and narratives of identity are embedded in its practice – in the newsroom and the classroom.

These narratives, shared here, can exalt the participants and over-emphasise the importance of 'self' and by stepping into another person's world I have sought to avoid the trap of narcissism or, equally damaging, omission (Josselson, 2005; Atkinson, 2006; Coward, 2010). This ambition has been supported by the research participants' humility, evident in the sharing of bad experiences, personal mistakes and examples of poor practice from their own lives. There is an authentically expressed belief that symbolism and genuine examples of their own fallibility can be as effective as teaching tools as exemplars derived from 'good' work. The approach to journalism education that emerges shies away from a conception of teaching by role model although it does not preclude the opportunity to lead by example.

Good times, bad times:

"I tried to take the experiences that I have had, or the knowledge that I have so that knowledge might be about sentence structure in the storytelling or it might be an experience about a situation that I have been in, in the field and translate it into something that is usable for people that are on that course or in that master class or whatever it is. So it's not simply a description of what happened to me or something that happened to me it's what can you learn from this"

- First Director of BBC College of Journalism

The first director of the BBC College of Journalism was formerly a foreign news editor, who stressed the importance of using stories from life experience in a way that is not descriptive, but useful and educational. He illustrates his point with an example from a session on editorial leadership, where he shares ten things that have gone “really well” and - as he says “more importantly really badly” with the participants, who are all journalists, often seasoned and sceptical. He believes that drawing lessons from life experiences and passing on those lessons through re-telling the experiences themselves, through the prism of self-analysis, which embraces the concept of educational utility is important. It is not enough ‘simply to talk about your experiences’ but to consider:

“How you can convert your experience and your knowledge into something that is usable by the people listening and actually has some kind of learning outcome at the end of it.”

He believes that sharing experiences usefully is something to cherish, since it is a rare skill and not everyone can do it. It involves:

- deep reflection
- distilling experiences into stories that have learning points - not simply retelling them.
- aspects of therapy – no rigid learning outcomes: “at best I hope that it just makes people feel more confident that they are not alone in this.”
- no role models – it is not telling war stories sitting on a bar stool
- engaging in empathy as a teaching style

- intangible learning points falling into 'quite a touchy feely kind of area'

Catharsis, confession and self-reflection:

For journalists, bringing autobiography into their practice can be a cathartic experience especially for those who have borne witness as foreign correspondents or reporters in the field where the compulsion to tell stories that have been 'felt with pain' is most marked (Di Giovanni, 2011).

Journalists understand the identity-shaping nature of bearing witness and reporting on the human stories from conflict zones (Beaumont, 2009; Colvin, 2012; Di Giovanni, 2011; Keane, 2005). The BBC acknowledges the importance of retrospective writing for its journalists and has devised the Radio 4 programme, *From Our Own Correspondent* to allow them to reflect on the way they reported stories at the time and to retell them in a personalised way.

This model of journalism - in - action, this way of thinking about life can be applied to ways of thinking about education where journalists reflect on and share their experience as a route to good practice through the retelling of stories, for example the teaching of writing for broadcast, where the power of words to paint pictures in the mind is conveyed through deconstructing the (written and spoken) stories of others.

Returning to the interview with the foreign correspondent, he believes that retrospective storytelling, recall and reflection – can be good reporting (like *From Our Own Correspondent*) and can also be useful in education – it is

cathartic, allowing him to assess the experience of the time through the prism of memory and to reach judgments about his own work. It is also an example of practising what he advises his students to do: interrogate their own work. It is a deeply autobiographical process. This is an extract from a radio talk that he shared:

“One morning I watched the procession of men and women emerge from a forest. They’d been driven from their homes two days earlier and had fled with what they could carry. Most were on foot. Some were crammed into the backs of ancient farm vehicles drawn by donkeys. There were perhaps 40,000 of them. Their hometown had fallen to a Serb advance that had come without warning. Among them, one man seemed close to collapse. He stopped to speak to us. ‘The whole town has fled,’ he said. He’d become separated from his wife in the long trek to safety, and was now worried that she hadn’t made it. His pale, almost translucently white skin was stretched across the bones of his face like parchment. His forehead was livid blue from a fall. And I asked him how old he was. He said he was 80. ‘May I ask,’ I said finally, ‘are you a Croat or a Muslim?’ The memory of it shames me even now as I hear in my mind his answer echo down the years: ‘I am,’ he said, ‘a musician.’”

He sees this as an example of putting himself, the storyteller, into the story, which is the essence of auto/biographical journalism. In writing this piece, he wanted the audience (which in a classroom context is students) to understand how he felt ‘rebuked’ by the answer:

“... what I took from it was, oh God, I’m just trying to reduce this old man at the worst moment of his life to his ethnic stereotype, and he’s a grandfather

and a husband and many things before he's a Muslim or a Croat. He's a musician and he's lost his home... and all his family.”

The journalist can make sense of deeply personal emotion through the act of retrospective writing, which contains more of the ‘self’:

“A piece of writing like that is a process of explaining to yourself what is happening, what's going on, and what you've made of it.”

It is a completely different experience from eyewitness reporting, but he believes that often for the journalist cathartic writing is an important route to self- understanding and in journalism education a useful and credible way of showing your workings. These reflections provide illuminating insights to how a journalist might work through personal emotions, the experience of reporting a story in ‘real time’ which is ‘of its time’ and the catharsis of reflection through retrospective writing. These are rich areas for us seeking to understand the layers of experience which constitute the essence of an individual journalist's approach to teaching, to passing on deeply personal experience in ways which are useful, accessible, educational and, crucially, credible.

Epiphanies, emotional response and education

“Your life and my life have little moments of happiness and joy and learning and excitement So that's what our viewers are like. And we have to reflect”
– BBC Northern Ireland producer

The confessional (and cathartic) character of autobiography in journalism is also evident in those who have experienced life changing moments, or epiphanies (Denzin, 1989). For some journalists their relationship with their

practice and the form in which they present it as educators has been shaped by this highly personal experience and their route into education has been directed by a moment of crisis or illumination.

One interviewee, a producer based in Northern Ireland who turned to teaching at the College of Journalism integrates this experience into her teaching – she says that sharing self-stories in an educational context can lead to others learning good practice and the craft of storytelling. She is insistent that journalism is “not heart surgery” but it is about telling stories in a compelling way and programme-making must reflect the realities of peoples’ lives in the stories that are told – this is her key educational point for journalists – it is about human stories: This point of view makes an assumption about audiences – that they are ‘best served’ or most interested in human stories – which is open to debate. However, it does chime with the notion of an ‘autobiographical age’ (Plummer, 2001), the dominance of reality TV and social media, which emphasise a more personalised approach to journalistic storytelling.

Her experience as an educator was transformative, in Denzin’s (1989) terms, it constitutes a ‘cumulative epiphany’ and she engages with the concept of a biographical approach to education with passion, honesty and integrity. Her life as a journalist and as an educator mirrors her life as a human being:

“It’s about people. It’s about their emotions – you share their sadness; you share their joy. That’s what we do and that’s the storytelling of it. So that’s what I would like to be known as.”

Conclusions: placing stories at the heart of the learning experience

Whilst understanding the pitfalls of extracting generalities from individual stories, this article hopes to provide some sense of the role that experienced journalism practitioners, who are significant interpreters of their times, can play in inculcating good practice in their craft through a role as educators. In terms of teaching methods, the BBC College employed a mix of classroom teaching, face-to-face workshops and seminars with online tools and resources. In my own teaching, I have invited working journalists to share their lived experiences with undergraduate and postgraduate students in a 'press conference' or interactive workshop-style setting, sometimes using current themes such as trust, ethics, reporting conflict to focus the talk and ensuing discussion. I have shared a detailed analysis at module level elsewhere (Fowler-Watt, 2015), but regardless of the teaching format, some key principles have emerged, which emphasise the importance of credibility, utility and accessibility for students.

Building confidence and creating a sense of 'belonging' have also emerged as important, so this article strives to illustrate how the use of 'lived experiences' by journalism educators can help to restore a connectivity, whereby the critical self-awareness of journalists and their ability to identify with those they are teaching can spawn an emotionally intelligent approach to journalism education. This does not mean that their deconstructed stories are imposed

on others like a code of conduct, but that they are shared in an immersive learning experience, which acknowledges the identity shaping characteristics of shared life experience – both for the educator and the student.

There can be no dissonance in the message; it must be transparent (honestly–shared) and credible, useful to the audience (learners) and shared in the spirit of learning oneself, of self- reflexivity. Journalism education that focuses on shared experience is shoulder-to-shoulder, immersive and must always have an eye to the wider context within which journalism as a craft resides. Learning outcomes and civic outcomes are blended as journalism educators seek to restore public trust and to place an ethical, evidence based craft back at the heart of public discourse. In a digital, autobiographical age, where everyone has a voice and everyman is a journalist, yet arguably few are listening amidst the noise, the storytellers who tell their stories of life as a journalism educator might rediscover meaning, belonging and help to restore the integrity of their craft.

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