

B14. Sustainability skills for Broadcast Journalism students

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The University's BA (Hons) Broadcast Journalism programme was validated in 2002 with a clear remit to attain professional accreditation by the Broadcast Journalism Training Council (BJTC). As well as the academic rigor required for a degree programme, students would also benefit from vocational teaching, learning and assessment to increase their appreciation of this employment sector. Therefore, it was vital that the programme was robust in being able to sustain good relationships with the broadcast journalism industry to help create, over time, an element of inter-dependency between our students and prospective employers.

The concept of 'responsible journalism' is a key theme throughout the course and this means that students understand the power of the spoken word in relation to the audiences they are trying to reach. There are many controls and constraints upon journalists in the field that can affect their ability to report issues impartially. The course structure is designed around good relationships in the industry so that working journalists can give real views on how stories are covered and the implications that 'poor' reporting can have on society as a whole.

It is accepted that not all students would wish to enter the journalism field as a career choice and the curriculum was designed so that the knowledge and skills required for successful completion would give all graduates a wealth of transferable skills to underpin their academic learning. The sustainable professional 'skills' needed for exercises like these are myriad. Lecturers need industry experience so that they can integrate teaching, learning and working practices and facilitate this in a motivational way to students. Industry professionals at the BBC are at varying stages of their own CPD and often gain from taking students 'back to basics' in guest lectures. For the students, they acquire not just editorial knowledge and technical skills but also attain a greater understanding of the motivations and professional norms of journalists working in the field. In its social context, a relative notion of democracy in society is dependent upon objective scrutiny, often through 'responsible journalism', a concept that is

reinforced with the relationship between the University and the BBC. This enhances the students' ability to integrate learning with working and particularly to give students strong role models when dealing with ethical dilemmas in journalism. More specifically the skills frequently cited as crucial for students to acquire if they wish to practice sustainably in any context include an ability to learn about learning, an ability to envision the future, to adapt to change and to behave responsibly. (PP4SD Project 1999)

This contribution centres on the creation of a small but vibrant and useful relationship with the county's main broadcaster, BBC Radio Gloucestershire. In particular, there are a number of modules which concentrate on applying theory to practice in assessed 'newsdays' which involve students gaining the theoretical knowledge of simulated newsroom working and practising this with active learning. The aims of this exercise are to prepare them for work placements during their programme and to give them confidence to apply for jobs in the industry once they have graduated. Therefore close alignment with the industry is vital and key relationships have been formed with BBC Radio Gloucestershire to sustain this aspect of the programme aims.

Aims

The assessed 'newsdays' aim to encourage knowledge, skills and personal qualities which would be prerequisite for those working in professional newsrooms. Five key aims are:

- To build on students' growing knowledge of the theory of journalism and how this affects and constrains the industry's professional norms
- To develop an appreciation and critical analysis of the journalism industry, including the role of partnerships and relationships with stakeholders, formal and informal, and be able to set this in a viable context
- To be able to originate stories, research, record, edit and present work of a broadcast quality expected in the industry
- To understand newsroom disciplines and apply team working practices
- To gain a greater awareness of social responsibility when reporting important issues that affect the way society is governed, and to

understand ethical considerations to which journalists adhere through industry Codes of Conduct as well as statutory regulation.

It is this last aim that resonates so strongly with the 'skills for sustainability' agenda, although the other aims are also significant for sustainable journalism practice. These aims are embedded in a number of practical modules and include assessed 'newsdays' which are part of the requirement of BJTC-accredited programmes. It is useful to note that BJTC accredited programmes have a special status with industry employers. Degrees with this accreditation offer a high level of industry involvement to aid the vocational experience for students, for example, bursaries help with finding industry placements, jobs bulletin board and access to industry resources.

Rationale

Teaching, learning and assessment on the Broadcast Journalism programme is designed to build the confidence of students from Level 1 to enable, encourage and inspire them to enjoy their learning experiences during their three years on the programme. Teaching delivery aims to enfranchise students to work individually and as a team and to be able to constructively critique their own and the work of others in a safe environment. There are five practical-based modules within the programme which utilise these industry-style 'newsdays'.

During the 'newsday' practice days (before the assessments take place), working journalists from BBC Radio Gloucestershire come in to spend the day with students helping them to research and write scripts and to understand the power of their voice and how to best present their work 'on air'. The diagram below gives an idea of how the inter-relationship between the Broadcast Journalism programme and BBC Radio Gloucestershire is sustained. This has been reinforced with the following:

- The sharing of best practice in terms of news values and ethical considerations which adheres to fair and balanced reporting that must be inclusive for all sectors in society
- Ensuring that all modules, exercises and assessments continue to embed the social responsibility values that all students need and which are an essential part of the research and interviewing process involving members of the public

- The introduction of the University/BBC Radio Gloucestershire Student Journalism Awards which give a £250 prize to the two students who show excellence in radio news and television news. (University of Gloucestershire 2007)
- The award of Honorary Doctorate to the Managing Editor of BBC Radio Gloucestershire
- The establishment of a BBC Radio Gloucestershire office on the Pittville Studios campus where the North Gloucestershire reporter is based
- The introduction of sustained work placements at BBC Radio Gloucestershire for Broadcast Journalism students during their programme

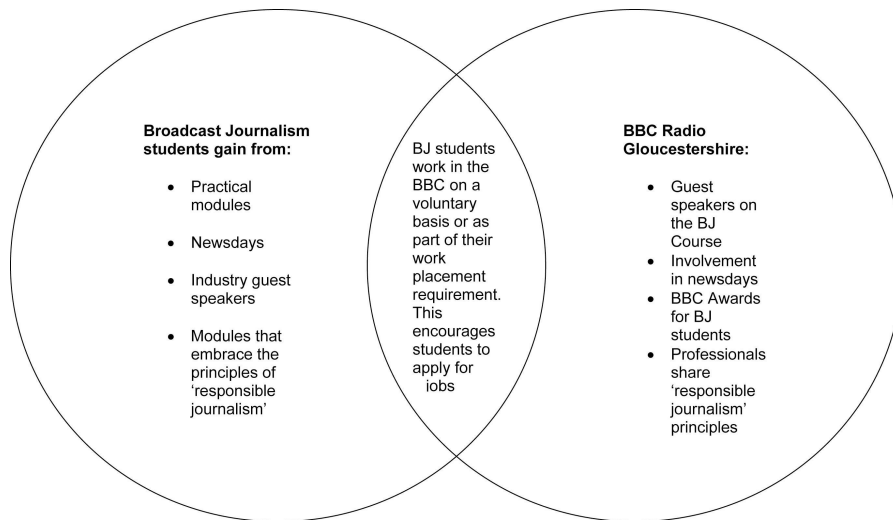


Figure 1. The developing symbiosis of the BJ programme and BBC Radio Gloucestershire. The intersection shows where the organisations interact and sustain a mutually beneficial relationship

Implementation

Students and staff work across a number of designated 'newsdays' to enable students to implement practical skills and apply journalism theory. The 'newsdays' are embedded in a number of practical modules.

A 14-week module will comprise of an initial six sessions to cover the theory of applied journalism and introduce, in a schematic way, the practical elements required to manifest the knowledge gained. Students then work with tutors and technical staff to build their technical competencies in recording, editing and presenting their work. This is achieved in industry standard teaching rooms which are adjacent to dedicated TV and radio studios.

In each session, students learn and practise how to originate stories, to research, record and edit their work and to present them to industry style. This knowledge and skills is endorsed with input from journalists at BBC Radio Gloucestershire (in the radio modules) who visit and advise during the module and on practice 'newsdays'. It is a vital part of the exercise that students are given guidance from academics and BBC Radio Gloucestershire journalists on the principles of 'responsible journalism' which is embedded in industry Codes of Conduct as well as statutory regulations. Students will go out to interview members of the public on any number of issues and they are able to put into practise their knowledge of ethical issues (for example, they should not interview children without parental consent), as well as their need to retain impartiality and objectivity so that the listener can make informed and unbiased opinions about news stories.

A requirement of this is the need for students to conduct themselves in a professional manner and these are some of the skills they will have learned from working journalists who have a regular input as guest lecturers. On the assessed 'newsdays', the students work as a team in designated newsroom roles to create news bulletins and a current affairs programme which is judged by a panel of academic and BBC staff. These are group marks but students are also assessed individually in reflective essays of their 'newsday' experience. Students are then encouraged to feed back *via* module evaluation forms to highlight specific and general aspects of their learning experience.

The resources used involve tutor input, lectures and seminars to practice particular learning outcomes (such as scripting, voicing and presentation of their work to industry standard) before considering the assessment criteria aligned to the newsday. Students rely on TV and radio equipment being up-to-date and to industry standard and take advantage of time-tabled workshops to increase their skills as well as open access times to complete digital editing of news packages that will enhance their broadcast programmes.

The 'newsdays' are split into shifts (as per industry norms) and students work in teams to create news bulletins and programmes throughout the day in the designated studios. The students choose who will fill particular 'roles' and also choose the programme they wish to go to the panel of judges (academic and industry) for marking. Experience shows that the students take their professional conduct very seriously as this has been embedded in all their modules leading up to the 'newsday' exercise. When assigning their roles, the students are successful at choosing a 'Producer' who is calm, diplomatic and has a good knowledge of media law and ethics as well as a mature stance in advising story treatments for sensitive social issues.

It is a demanding day and the students find themselves challenged in many areas, yet their evaluations show how much they enjoyed their learning experience despite the demands the assessments make. They take with them a clearer understanding of how the way they work can affect the audiences they are targeting and the responsibility to make sure their stories are accurate, fair and sensitive to all sectors of society. This is enhanced by the relationships built between the course tutors and journalists at BBC Radio Gloucestershire. In the context of student journalists, it is vital that they can apply this knowledge in a responsible way. There is also a duty to ensure that students gain an holistic sense of social responsibility regardless of what employment they choose to embrace. The course aims to give students the ability to use clear, independent thinking to enhance their choices and to, hopefully, pass on this ethos to peers.

Sustainability focus

The students' knowledge and skills are manifested in their appreciation of the industry environment and how they need to be flexible to cope with industry demands. The social benefits come through journalism as a whole

and their need to relate to people from every sector of society during their origination and investigation of stories. Throughout their three-year programme, students are exposed to many ethical dilemmas and are challenged through the curriculum to consider the important journalistic principles which encourage a healthy democracy. Not least, they also have opportunities to explore explicitly aspects of national and international debates about sustainability, as these are so important in the national media currently. The constant flow of industry guest speakers and guest lecturers help to reinforce these values and create good student motivations to constantly reflect on their performance and attain high levels of citizenship.

In two of their modules, students study the law and its constraints on how they write their broadcast scripts following court cases. The general public is unaware of how many considerations journalists must take into account before a story is broadcast and how these reporting restrictions affect the amount of information an audience is given. Students learn how to impart the important details which allow the audience to make informed opinions and the guest lectures reinforce this. It is intended that students graduate from the programme well able to understand the role of the media in promoting public debate about issues such as citizenship and ethical activities in democracies, and in ensuring social inclusion in their approaches.

An example of this is shown in the two-way involvement of BBC Radio Gloucestershire and the Broadcast Journalism programme team. As our students increase their knowledge and skills, they are better placed to work at BBC Radio Gloucestershire on a voluntary basis (through the BBC Action Desk, Community Service Volunteers and work placements) and this is encouraged by having a BBC employee based on the campus who is able to input as a guest speaker and during practice 'newsdays'. This in turn encourages students to apply for paid work at BBC Radio Gloucestershire and several students enjoy casual paid contracts with the station outside their formal curriculum. At BBC Radio Gloucestershire the journalists appreciate the level of professional skills and principled values the students have attained and this enhances the students' work placement and job opportunities. It is also the case that students are now able to apply for permanent employment at the radio station and have as much chance of success as experienced working journalists from non-BBC outlets.

Active learning

Active learning is an integral part of the Broadcast Journalism programme and also a requirement of the BJTC accreditation. This is an 'easy win' for the programme because much of the teaching, learning and assessment are based on active learning. Students are encouraged to think independently, create their own learning experience and to implement these in a collegiate way. Tutors guide through lectures and seminars and also through individual or group tasks for students to undertake during their independent study time. Assessments take the form of group and individual work which allows for application, expression, and reflection.

Examples of active learning include:

- Active learning is embedded across most of the Broadcast Journalism modules and this involves acquiring knowledge and then expressing this using applied techniques. For example, in the media law and ethics module, students study the law and then go into court to cover a court case
- Practical modules where students take on newsroom roles in a simulated industry environment, advised and encouraged by industry experts
- There is active involvement of external agencies such as BBC Radio Gloucestershire; other (and varied) media broadcast outlets such as ITV and Sky News, as well as the BJTC
- Pedagogic research underpins the Broadcast Journalism programme through a variety of sources such as academic best practice, industry practice and norms, Higher Education Academy case studies and papers. The Broadcast Journalism team also recently undertook some active learning research into the push-pull relationship of vocational versus academic learning and this was presented *via* a PowerPoint presentation with an accompanying eight-minute video of interviews of students and industry professionals. A CD-Rom is available from the address below.

Feedback

Student feedback to tutors is very positive. Most enjoy the Broadcast Journalism programme and value the dynamic teaching delivery and up-to-date approaches and resources.

The 'newsdays' demonstrate active learning which students find enjoyable and rewarding in both an academic and vocational sense. Module evaluations are highly positive and we receive more completed student evaluation forms on the 'newsday' radio and television modules than the pure theory modules. Without exception the students are complimentary about these modules and are keen to emphasise how much they enjoy and learn from industry guest speakers.

The present external examiner from this programme is an industry professional (the managing editor of ITN in London) and he is very positive about the use of practical-based modules to give students the skills to apply their knowledge of journalism. He noted particularly that the course has 'solid foundations' which also establish 'an ethos that combines a caring environment with journalistic integrity.'

The student evaluations of the 'newsday' exercises show they gain a greater understanding of the realities of working in journalism and the responsibility that comes with it. Here are some of their comments:

There's so much more to journalism than we thought. It's not just about learning technical skills, it's also about learning how to research stories and relate them to audiences. There's quite a lot of responsibility to make sure we ask the right questions to find the answers... we have to put ourselves in the shoes of the listener and viewer and it's daunting sometimes.

The 'newsdays' are really tough but they are also really rewarding. We needed to do it (the newsday) to make us see what it's like in real life' (Level 2 student)

I've found the newsday modules such a challenge. Its made me realise that behind the glamour of journalists on the radio and television, there is a seriousness to journalism that affects all of us. (Level 3 student)

The Managing Editor of BBC Radio Gloucestershire is also highly positive about the station's relationship with the Broadcast Journalism course,

It is beneficial to both parties because students meet our journalists at varying stages of their careers, from reporters to presenters, to management, and this gives them a different perspective on the industry. The students understand what we require and I fully expect to see some of them as our future employees. We want our journalists to up-hold the BBC's long-held tradition of fair and balanced reporting and it is imperative that the University of Gloucestershire's broadcast journalism students understand these important values. We have a successful partnership that is not just useful to the students but will also be beneficial for us here at the BBC.

Strengths and Weaknesses

The success of the newsdays is dependent on a number of factors which centre on student motivation and engagement. It is worth noting that the vast majority of students are very involved with the exercise and this is due in part to the implementation of practical exercises which expose students to industry professionals at BBC Radio Gloucestershire. The facilities on campus are of industry standard and give students a sense of 'newsroom reality'. All tutors have industry backgrounds and create modules designed to challenge students to apply their knowledge and skills. The students understand that making news and current affairs programmes require responsibility to a target audience and that these must adhere to professional norms in the industry. Guests from the BBC work with students to reinforce ethical values and responsible journalism and this is embraced by the students.

However, there are areas where students challenge lecturers and these centre on the group marking of this particular exercise. Group marking is a valid form of assessment because team working is an intrinsic part of journalism and reflects those norms. It can be aligned in a journalistic sense to students being 'judged by their peers' and this is not always a comfortable concept for some. There are occasions when weaker students are 'carried' by their stronger colleagues and this reflects reality in newsrooms. It must also be acknowledged that some students do not wish to take journalism as a career and therefore have different motivations. The transparency of the assessments at the outset of the module outlines these challenges and the students embrace the exercise regardless of their ambivalence of career choice. They enjoy the exercise for its own sake and have an equal input in the 'newsdays'.

Programmes

Within the Broadcast Journalism programme, one fifth of the programme modules use assessed 'newsdays'. These occur at all three Levels of the programme. The other modules offer a mix of pure academic theory and applied journalism. The Broadcast Journalism programme takes work-based learning very seriously and there are a number of initiatives that the tutors have created that seek to embed the students learning experience into viable industry norms, for example, the hours worked, industry climate and unforeseen event planning.

Keywords:

Broadcast journalism; BJTC; BBC Radio Gloucestershire; work placements; work-based learning; 'newsdays'

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