Doing it for Real: A study of experiential and situated learning approaches in teaching journalism practice through engagement with the public domain.

Abstract:

In recent years there has been a huge growth in apprenticeship and internship style learning in the UK but does this provide students with a safe place to make mistakes or are they simply mirroring the mistakes of others? This paper will examine the application of the Experiential Learning Cycle of Kolb (Kolb, 1984) in journalism education alongside the Situated Learning and Communities of Practice approach as advocated by Lave and Wenger (Lave and Wenger, 1991). It will examine the ethical challenges faced using both models in relation to creating a safe place to make mistakes in an era of intense pressure to engage in the public domain. The author will do this by looking at two case studies of universities in the UK teaching journalism through practice and adopting different approaches to students engaging with industry and placing their work in the public domain and the ethical and pedagogical challenged this produces.

Introduction:

Scholars have argued for years about which is the most effective way to teach journalism and have called for new ways to reinvent journalism education (Dennis, 1984; Medsger, 1996; Reese, 1999; Reese and Cohen, 2000; Adam, 2001, MacDonald, 2006; Deuze, 2006; Mensing, 2010 & 2011). Much has been written about how journalism courses have tended to focus on providing training for students to get jobs in the media industry (Dickson, 2000; Becker, 2003) and how often the curriculum is shaped by the requirements of industry and professional accreditation standards (Zelizer, 2004) but ignores more critical, conceptual and contextual thinking (Greenberg 2007).

Meanwhile the traditional news organisations that helped shape this training-based journalism education and feed into the accreditation bodies' requirements, are struggling with falling sales whilst audiences engage with news through a plethora of alternative platforms and sources. (Mensing, 2010 & 2011). Mensing argued that teaching students the practices that reinforce the status quo is of little use to them and can prevent them from adopting new responses and innovations. She said this devolves degree programmes into little more than training courses (Mensing 2010, 2011). She called for a realignment of journalism education from an industry-centred model to a community-focused approach as one way to re-engage it in a more productive and vital role in the future of journalism. She argues a 'community-centered focus could provide a way to conceptualise a reconstitution of journalism education to match that taking place in journalism beyond the university.'(Mensing, 2010.p 511).

Journalism education in the UK is now predominantly delivered in Higher Education (HE) at both undergraduate and postgraduate degree level. (Baines, 2017).
The first undergraduate programmes in journalism were launched in the 1990s but previously training was expected from employers as a fit and proper way for them to invest in staff and maintain standards. (Greenberg, 2007)

Over recent years there has been a drive in the UK towards ensuring journalism programmes are accredited by a recognised industry body. In 2015 over a third of the UK's 300 undergraduate and postgraduate journalism courses were accredited by at least one of the main accreditation bodies (NCTJ, BJTC, PPA). Canter (2015) said this demonstrated the marketing value universities place on such schemes in an increasingly competitive marketplace and asked questions about the ongoing value of belonging to these bodies in an increasingly digital age. However, The Broadcast Journalism Training Council (BJTC), the biggest of these organisations, still accredits 56 courses in the UK (figures correct May 2019).

The BJTC stipulates a list of practice-orientated skills that it requires students to be accomplished in as part of their degree course. According to the requirements, achieving these ensures the 'highest professional standards in journalism training.' (BJTC, 2017.p2) and when students graduate, they are 'capable of working in the production of online, multimedia and broadcast in the world of news, current affairs, features and documentaries.' (BJTC, 2017. p2). Meanwhile universities are increasingly marketing their courses as being aligned with industry providing work ready graduates. In order to achieve accreditation courses are shaped by professional bodies along the lines of training, much like Zelizer (2004) suggested.

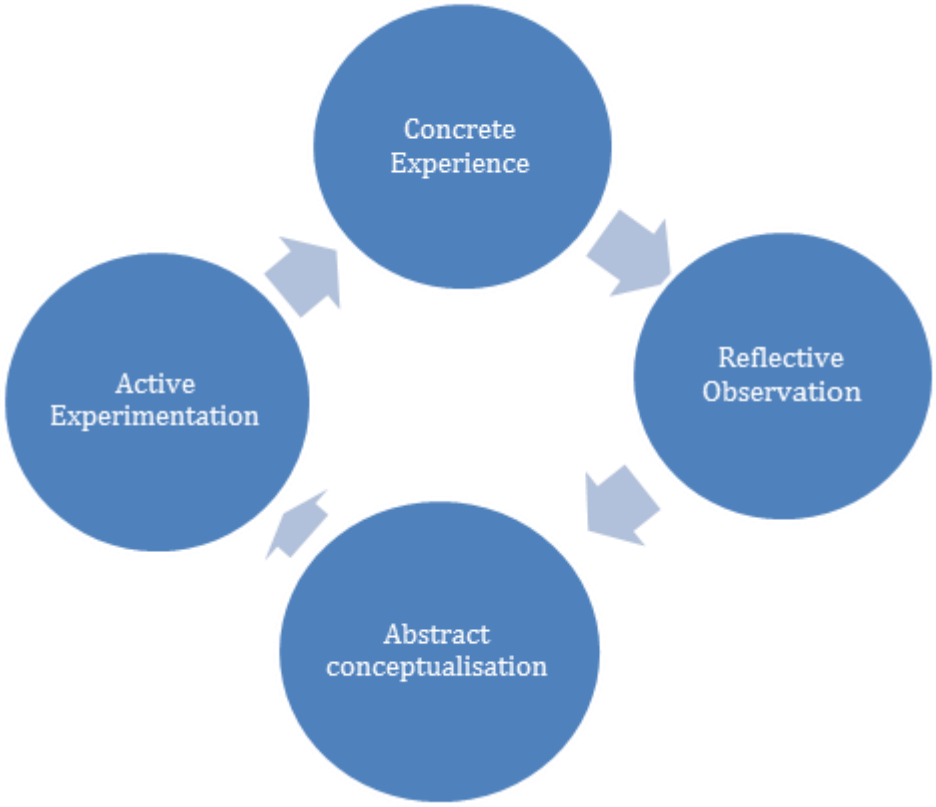
The main focus of the BJTC courses is news days, a simulation of a working newsroom where students cover real stories and create TV and radio programmes and websites under tight deadlines. They then reflect upon the process, apply relevant theory to their findings and go out and do it all again the following week. It is a model that aligns closely with the principles of experiential learning and in particular the Experiential Learning Cycle (ELC) of David Kolb (Kolb, 1984).

Experiential Learning:

Experiential learning theories build on social and constructivist theories of learning whereby the emphasis is on the individual construction of the world and knowledge being created by the student building their own mental models based on their own experience. The idea can be seen to have its origins in the work of Jean Piaget, John Dewey and Kurt Lewin which challenged the view of biological determinism that was prevalent at the time.

Experiential learning theorists situate experience at the core of the learning process and aim to understand the manners in which experiences, whether first or second hand, motivate learners and promote their learning.
They are based on the theory that ideas are not fixed but are formed and reformed through reflection. All start with the premise that experience is essential to the learning process and that it is possible to integrate theory and practice through reflection.
The most prominent modern day developer of experiential learning theory is Kolb. Kolb defines learning as '…the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience.' (Kolb, 1984, p38). Kolb's (ELC) (Kolb, 1984) draws upon four main bases that the learner must engage with: concrete experience; reflective observation; abstract conceptualisation, active experimentation and then the cycle returns to concrete experience. (See Figure 1).

Figure 1: Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle



The model builds on the premise that practice will be adjusted based upon the reflection and the theory building. The learner can engage with the cycle at any stage.
Kolb based his model on what he calls the Lewinian Experiential Learning Model. He stressed that in order for experiential learning to be successful there needed to be two aspects: concrete and immediate experience valuable of creating meaning in learning and feedback/reflection. The model is based upon action research and laboratory teaching which are characterised by feedback. Kolb said that the information provided by feedback is the starting point of a continuous process consisting of goal-directed action and evaluation of the consequences of this action. While Dewey talked about the integration of action and thinking (Dewey, 1916) Kolb distinguishes between different learning styles needed for action and thinking allowing students to engage with the cycle at various different stages. He referred to a 'dialectical tension' between the experiential and conceptual stages but resolves the tension by placing them as separate stages in his model.

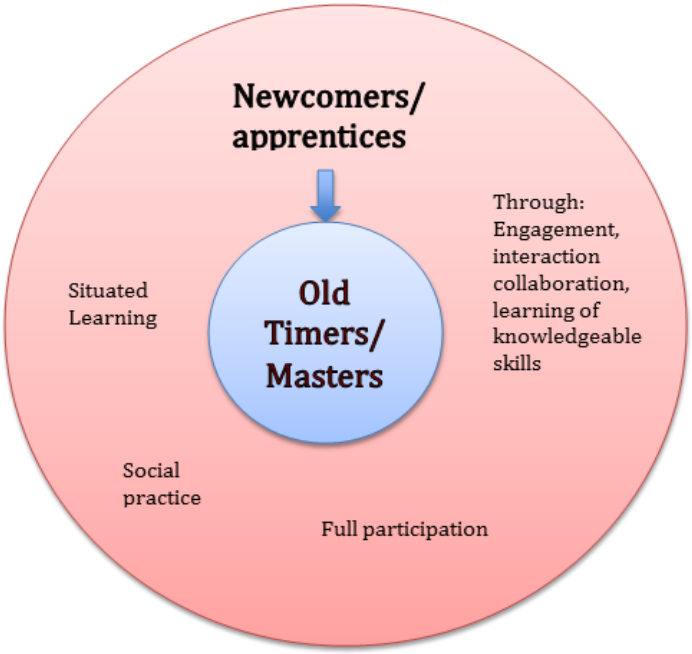
Similarly, Schön, like Kolb, approaches learning from an organisational discipline. His work (Schön, 1983) can be seen to compliment Kolb's in that he argues that engaging with practice, underpinned by intellectual theory, helps to maintain knowledge. He uses the phrase 'reflective practicum' to refer to this.
Beard and Wilson (2006) attempt to integrate the social, historical and cultural aspects of learning which Kolb did not include. Others have taken a different

definition of experiential learning. Rogers (1969) theory of experiential learning comes from a humanistic approach to psychology. He distinguished two types of learning: cognitive, from academic knowledge, which he said was meaningless and experiential which, relates to applied knowledge, which he describes as significant. The distinction was that experiential learning addresses the needs and wants of the learner. He argued that learning occurs when the student participates completely in the learning process and has control over it. There are some similarities between Rogers approach and that of Kolb in that they both require students to learn from reflecting on their own experiences, however they differ in the fact that Rogers approach negates the need for academic involvement and the reflection to be done in the classroom and therefore it can be argued that this is closer to the situated learning theory and communities of practice approaches.

Situated Learning:

Situated learning theory is a socio-cultural approach and focuses on students' changing participation in a community of practice. According to this perspective there is no learning which is not situated, emphasising the relational and negotiated character of knowledge and learning as well as the engaged nature of learning activity for the individuals involved. According to the theory, it is within communities that learning occurs most effectively. Interactions taking place within a community of practice (E.g. cooperation, problem solving, building trust, understanding and relations) have the potential to foster community social capital that enhances the community members' wellbeing.
Lave and Wenger (1991) coined the term Communities of Practice (COP) for groups of people who share a concern or passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly. According to Lave and Wenger, a COP is constituted by a domain of knowledge, which defines a set of issues; a community of people who care about this domain, and the shared practice that they are developing to be effective in that domain. They develop this notion of a community of practice through their idea of Legitimate Peripheral Participation (LPP). They look at five studies of apprenticeship and seek to understand how newcomers or apprentices could become masters through engagement, interaction, collaboration and learning knowledgeable skills. Newcomers are peripheral to masters of whatever practice but participate in a legitimate and useful way through social practice and situated learning. (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Lave and Wenger's Legitimate Peripheral Participation Model



Wenger (1998) extended the concept and applied it to other areas, such as organisations. The increase in online communities has seen this applied further afield in recent years (Stoker, 2015) and, it can be argued that the resurgence in apprenticeships can be seen as more closely aligned with this approach (Fuller, 2005).
For Lave and Wenger the key distinguishing factor of COPs was not just experiencing the practice but fully participating in the community in which it took place.

> In our view, learning is not merely situated in practice as if it were some independently reifiable process that just happened to be located somewhere; learning is an integral part of generative social practice in the lived-in world. (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p.35).

For experiential learning theory, however, the learning occurs not in the participation but in the reflection. Scholars have argued that for experiential learning to truly happen that reflection needs to be formal, facilitating the students' understandings of what has been learned. (Usher & Soloman, 1999, Moon 2004).

Applying the models to journalism education

What does this mean for journalism and how can these theoretical perspectives be applied to the issues that have arisen in teaching it? The author has already hinted at a theory/practice divide that has arisen in journalism education as journalism practitioners enter the academic world keen on providing training for jobs whilst academics wish to preserve the critical engagement skills. (Dickson, 2000; Becker, 2003; Greenberg, 2007, Mensing 2010 and 2011). This issue can be seen to be ever more present in recent years with increasing calls from industry leaders and journalism scholars for practical learning and real content production (Parks, 2015) resulting in many courses requiring practising journalists to teach on them and

universities marketing their courses as providing real world experience and skills and strong links with industry.
Meanwhile academics have argued that these skills simply reinforce the status quo and devolve degree programmes into little more than training courses (Mensing, 2010 and 2011).

Greenberg (2007) looked at Kolb's ELC as a solution to this and concluded that journalism practitioners would gain value by engaging with theory to give the experiential learning cycle the chance to explore its fullest potential. She also argued that theory-based disciplines should look at alternative theoretical frameworks and examine their own response to feedback from practice (2007, p.302). Brandon (2002) said that experiential learning could open new areas of knowledge for journalism education as well as helping to improve courses for students. She wanted to discover whether courses addressed students' career aspirations, encouraged initiative, offered training that would lead to different job positions, allowed input, used mistakes as learning opportunities, provided frequent feedback on performance and encouraged the use of knowledge gained in other learning settings (Brandon 2002, p65).
Steel et al (2007) advocated the use of experiential learning following their study with postgraduate students working as real journalists on the 2005 UK General Election. This was a one-off experiment followed up by reflection and semi structured interviews. The authors raised questions about how educators manage the balance between 'throwing students in at the deep end to resolve problems' whilst 'still retaining sufficient control' (Steel, 2007, p333).

Other studies based on short-term experiential style learning exercises have advocated this theoretical perspective (Kartveit, 2009, Evans, 2016 and 2017, Parks 2015).
However, the definition of experiential learning and the application of it was slightly different in each of the studies. For some, there was an overlap with the pedagogical approaches used in communities of practice (Wenger, 1998). Steel et al (2007) referred to the ways in which students learn from and with each other through the development of communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) within journalism and said that this area was relatively under-researched (Steel et al 2007). This suggested that it is possible to have a community of practice within Higher Education, and it doesn't have to be exclusively linked to the traditional apprenticeship model. Students could learn from one another with a common domain of knowledge, goals and practices and would bond together by the common goal of producing the programme/website or newspaper. On news days, the experiential learning activity prescribed by the BJTC, students are not only expected to work as a team, but as a team with a clearly structured hierarchy, where peers stop being peers (Steel et al 2007). Whilst there is hierarchy in Lave and Wenger's COP model, Steel's work showed that students taking part in this exercise were not always ready for that level of authority and, at times, it caused dissent amongst the group.
Parks (2015) case study examined experiential learning in enhancing skills in news writing where students in a classroom environment were able to publish their work. Whilst pointing out benefits of experiential learning in giving students hands-on experience, Parks argues that the trade-offs prompted by this approach could be that analytical instruction is sacrificed in the name of 'real-world' experience (Parks 2015, p136). He called for a variety of approaches for journalism education.

> Experience-based courses should not be the exclusive format for teaching journalism, but experiential learning is essential to a quality journalism education. (Parks, 2015. p 36)

This understanding of experiential learning differs slightly from the Kolb model (Kolb, 1984) in that whilst Parks' exercise was useful in providing students with skills and experience, it gave less time to the instruction and reflection which are central to Kolb's model (Kolb, 1984).

The author's own work, (Evans, 2017) followed the Kolb model more closely in arguing for experiential learning to be successful in journalism education there needs to be a 'safe place to make mistakes' (Evans, 2017. p75) with opportunity for critique and reflection.
This concept of a "safe space" is referred to widely across disciplines.
In management education in arguing that in order for experiential learning to be beneficial a "safe space" needed to be created early if deeper learning is to be achieved, and this would enable critical thinking (Kisfalvi and Oliver 2016, p735).
These approaches adhere to an education rather than training-based approach where the need for reflection alongside repetition is essential in the learning process.
Winnicott (1989) said the classroom becomes a transitional or in-between space that prepares students to move into the real world.
Schaffer (2004), however, argues that reflection can be done on the job in journalism as reflecting on one's practice is a skill internalised by the learner as they become part of a practice community.
He looks at the professions of architecture, mediation and journalism and draws upon Schön's idea of the 'reflective practicum' where learners have a capacity to combine reflection and action, on the spot, 'to examine understandings and appreciations while the train is running.' (Schön, 1985, p.27). Schaffer argues that Schön's reflective process is progressively internalised in journalism through norms, habits, expectations, abilities, and understandings of a community of practice and refers to Lave and Wenger's model in allowing individuals to reframe their identities.

> For example, journalists share common ways of thinking and working, and individuals who work in the field of journalism incorporate these ways of thinking and working into their sense of self, coming to think of themselves, at least in part, as journalists (Schaffer, 2004. p1404).

There is some obvious overlap between the two theoretical perspectives of experiential and situated learning and it can be argued that what is needed to reinvent journalism education and prepare students for the changing world of the profession is a hybrid approach.

Tulloch and Mas Manchon (2018) looked at The Catalan News Agency Experiment (CNAE) at Pompeu Fabra University in Barcelona where third and fourth year students were tasked with providing professional-level English-language content for an official news agency. The CNAE saw students producing directly for consumption in the public domain. Students worked for the agency from January to June but were based in their classroom with tutors fine tuning the skills necessary to produce

professional-level material for the agency whilst also providing academic critique and rigour. Authors argued that the project helped bridge the gap between theory and practice. The CNAE project can be seen to have some similarities with the the second case study in this paper at University B.

Two UK Case Studies:

Both case studies are at post 92 Universities which offer BJTC accredited journalism courses but follow a different pedagogical approach to their teaching of practice.

University A follows a model closer to Kolb's ELC (Kolb, 1984) in that its days are focused around feedback and reflection.
News days start, like most busy news rooms, with a meeting to discuss the news agenda, students then go out of the classroom and find real stories, film, record audio, write, edit and present a final broadcast product to a tight deadline. However, unlike a real newsroom, they end with a session of feedback and reflection. The process is then repeated the following day or week with students putting into practice what they have learned on the previous news day. News days here can therefore be seen to be the embodiment of Kolb's ELC (Kolb, 1984).
The days therefore are a hybrid of experiential and simulation-based learning. Whilst the students report on real stories in the world outside of the classroom, they are under the guidance of a tutor and there is opportunity for learning from their mistakes. (Evans, 2017; Kisfalvi and Oliver, 2016; Winnicott, 1965). The university operates a cautious and gradual approach to autonomy in that material produced on these days is kept in house at first and second year and only third year and masters work is placed in public domain once it has been checked by a lecturer. This is not the practice on all BJTC accredited universities though and it raises questions about professional identity and whether these experiences at University A are real enough to make the student feel like a journalist.

University B adopts a pedagogy closer to Lave and Wenger's situated learning or LPP model (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Students on this journalism course are offered an optional module working as an intern at a local television station. The module, runs alongside other traditional classroom-based modules that the students also take in their third year instead of news days and two theory-based modules. The students are not paid for the internship and work a week on/week off shift pattern with alternate weeks being spent back in the classroom environment in workshops and tutorials. They are fully integrated into the newsroom and are expected to operate as a professional journalist during their time on this module adhering to the workflow and practices of the newsroom rather than the classroom. Material they produce is broadcast in the public domain and is also used as part of a portfolio for assessment on the module. This raises questions as to whether these students have a safe place to make mistakes (Evans, 2017; Kisfalvi and Oliver, 2016; Winnicott, 1965). It also poses some ethical challenges for teaching journalism in terms of exposing students to real world work flows and practices in relation to reconciling apparent inequalities in the newsroom with the parity expected by students in HE.

Ethical challenges

In the author's earlier work Evans (2017) she argued that students valued the 'safe place to make mistakes' (Evans, 2017, p.75) on news days as this gave them confidence to experiment. However, this needed to be balanced by the need for exposure and reality (Evans, 2017, p.81). Madison argued that concerns about providing a safe place to make mistakes are mitigated by the perceived benefits of immersive "real world" experience and being able to 'participate in news-gathering alongside seasoned professionals.' (Madison, 2014, p.318). It must be noted that Madison mentioned that the students worked 'alongside seasoned professionals' (p.318) hence there was someone present to act as the master in the master/apprenticeship relationship (Lave and Wenger, 1991) scaffolding their learning and giving them someone to reflect with. Journalism education is rapidly evolving and further anecdotal evidence that the author has received from students since publishing her work suggests that students expect their news day work to be published/broadcast so it is timely to revisit this issue.
In relation to University A' s model this poses questions as to whether it goes far enough to provide the real world experiences that university courses are increasingly encouraged to provide.
One lecturer teaching into the course at University A thought that when material was published at third year and masters' level it was transformative:

> I think, it's a very transformative environment, I think, for the students, when they are publishing. There are a number of things I know they're highly motivated by. The first is that they have an online portfolio of live work, which showcases their skills, and it's one of the things I know that students are very, very keen on, because often they're going straight from their award or programme straight into the world of work, and so having a by-line, having something that's in the published environment. (Lecturer 1, University A)
>
> That people can see? (Interviewer)
>
> Yes, that people can see – is really, really important. (Lecturer 1, University A)

The lecturer also said that she had noticed that students developed more pride in their work as a result of it going into the public domain.
However, whilst this approach may boost the confidence of some, for others it can limit their creativity as they become fearful of making mistakes (Evans, 2017).
It also raises questions as to whether members of the public who students interview as part of their news days would want their contributions broadcast in the public domain.
Whilst on one hand it may give the student more kudos in securing interviews as the contributor would know that there was potential exposure for their content, on the other hand it may make securing sensitive interviews more difficult. It also poses challenges about the professional identity of the student; are they students of journalism or journalists who are students? If the students are working as journalists as part of their university course the university then the university is responsible for them and, if the content is broadcast the public domain, it is also responsible for that content.

At University B students are told from the moment they start the course that they are journalists first students second.

> And that is kinda the ethos of (*name of institution*) we tell them don't think of yourselves as students think of yourselves as journalists who happen to be students. It is the kind of ethos we try to instil in all students whether they are on (*name of internship module*) or whether they are working as a newsgathering team on news days. (Lecturer 2, University B)

Lecturer 2 said that she felt students valued being treated as professionals and she had received predominantly positive feedback from students about their experiences in relation to the employability skills they perceived it gave them.
However, she had noticed that those who were on the optional internship module had started to develop a sense of superiority, presuming that because they were working for a real world media organisation and their work was being broadcast in the public domain they were better than the others. She said at times this caused tensions in the cohort which lecturers then had to reconcile. All students on the course are entitled to a parity of experience however, for some having this added exposure and kudos that working for a TV company gave them meant they felt elevated above others in the cohort. It also gave them more opportunities to produce TV material needed for their portfolios. This then led to some students doing better in their portfolio assessments than those who were on the traditional news day module. The module has since been redesigned to address this.

Reconciling the differences between classroom and newsroom pose an ethical challenge with the model. University B's model aligns well with the Lave and Wenger (1991) situated learning and LPP model in that students fully participate in a COP, learn what they need to know and do from journalists at the TV station and gradually become a part of the community. However, by adopting the workflow and practices of the newsroom rather than the classroom can cause tensions. Whilst in some areas the students gained additional skills, in other areas there were gaps.
Lecturer 2 said this meant that in recent years they have built in additional support for the weeks these students are back in the classroom. Additional support included inviting the internship students to join the traditional news days on their weeks off shift to ensure they got experience of radio news, required by the accreditation body but not provided by the TV station:

> The main tension will be because we don't have editorial control or input it is a complete stand alone independent commercial organisation whose main goal is obviously output that we have no say over, so our students, we cut them loose to it and we have got all these measures to support that and mitigate for anything that might go wrong in that scenario so it's a balance that the week on week off enables. (Lecturer 2, University B)

This intervention can be seen as an additional safety net built in to bolster the experience on the internship and potentially compensate for any shortfalls that full participation can bring.
The Lave and Wenger model presumes that newcomers/apprentices will learn from old timer/masters which is an integral part of the internship set up. Students are also

given feedback at the end of the day from editors at the TV station through a programme debrief. Whilst this may be good for developing their practical skills and ensuring that they replicate the practices of the newsroom, (Mensing, 2010, 2011), this is purely practical and professional. It does not foster the critical engagement skills that Greenberg (2007) said can be incorporated through the reflective observation and abstract conceptualisation elements of Kolb's ELC (Kolb, 1984). Instead these skills are developed in workshops and tutorials with academic teaching staff on the weeks the student is off shift.

The model also raises some questions about learning from old-timers/masters and whether students are also picking up bad habits alongside essential employability skills.

As the internship is an accredited university module, students undertaking it are not paid for their work as a journalist at the TV station. Whilst the students are aware of this from the outset, clearly value the employability skills it gives them and see themselves as journalists, it could be asked whether it is ethical to not pay people for working for up to 15 weeks a year. University B's ethos of journalists who happen to be students runs through the whole course, yet if these students are working as journalists it could be argued they should be paid as journalists. Further work is needed to find out how many of these students go onto paid work as a journalist after graduating and how many are subsequently taken on as paid staff by the TV company.

Conclusion:

This paper examined two models of teaching journalism practice through engagement with the public domain. One took a more cautious approach focusing on the process of reflection on the practice rather than the practice itself and had similarities to Kolb's ELC (Kolb, 1984) while the other adopted an approach closer to Lave and Wenger's situated learning and LPP model (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Both models pose many ethical challenges for teaching journalism. The author's earlier work advocated the need for a 'safe place to make mistakes' on news days (Evans, 2017). However, by examining two different pedagogical models at two university settings she concludes that the exposure that placing students and their material in the public domain can bring many benefits which can mitigate some of the ethical issues raised. With multimedia newsrooms and classrooms in universities claiming to echo industry's digital first mantra and the increasing normalisation of people's lives being recorded on social media, if students are still to feel they are doing it for real (Evans, 2016) then support needs to be built in to mitigate for what might go wrong. It may be time to look into a hybrid of the two models through a placement year or summer enabling students to return to the classroom for the final year of study where they can truly reflect upon their time in the COP. Whilst this may not completely address Mensing's concerns about journalism education (Mensing, 2010 & 2011) it may enable some form of synergy between the two theoretical perspectives of learning.

The author aims that further research through focus groups and semi-structured interviews will discover students' and former students' perceptions of these two ways of learning the practice of journalism, whether they feel they are able to safely make mistakes and when, if at all, they feel they have become journalists.

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