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TEACHING AND PROFESSIONAL FELLOWSHIP REPORT

An Investigation into the feasibility of developing a Virtual Newsroom

- An e-learning tool for journalism

KATHY HILTON - JULY, 2005

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TEACHING AND PROFESSIONAL FELLOWSHIP REPORT

AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE FEASIBILITY OF DEVELOPING A VIRTUAL NEWSROOM – AN E-LEARNING TOOL FOR JOURNALISM

Introduction

The aim of my fellowship was to put the idea of developing a Virtual Newsroom – an online means of teaching journalism -- to the test.

I began work on this idea some six years ago after many years of using computers in the teaching of journalism. At that time, I developed, together with the IT Research and Development Unit (ITRDU), at the London Institute (now University of the Arts London), an e-learning prototype based on the 'breaking story' exercise – a fundamental exercise for journalism teaching.

In tests on students the early prototype proved to be an effective method for learning journalism skills. The students found the prototype programme a worthwhile and stimulating experience. Teachers of journalism saw it as an innovative way of teaching journalism, but were hampered by the fact that there was no way, with the programme as then developed, they could get behind the scenes to change any of the content, or other elements of the exercise.

It was essential then, that in any future development, the programme would have to have enough flexibility to enable journalism teaching staff to easily manipulate the content.

It also became clear that, six years on, it was necessary to determine if any new developments in online learning for journalists had superseded my original idea.

- Is the Virtual Newsroom idea still at the cutting edge of online learning technologies for journalism teaching and training in this country and beyond? Is this still an innovative and valid means of teaching journalism?

- If it is, could the university's Virtual Learning Environment host, sustain and develop such a programme? Are there other way to develop the idea?

- What are the costs involved, of continuing the development of such a programme?

The e-learning context for the Virtual Newsroom idea

Any development of a new prototype for a Virtual Newsroom needs to be seen in the context of the present situation for e-learning. Since those early experiments of six years ago there have been many developments – in our own college and university and in education as a whole.

In higher education we've seen the rise and fall of the e-University, a £62 million project announced by the Government in February 2000 and a major e-learning experiment. The residual grant some, £32 million, from that originally allocated for the e-University project has recently been redistributed to individual institutions.

E-learning and Virtual Learning Environments remain a fact of life in the majority, if not all of, higher education institutions in the UK, including the University of the Arts.

In its latest 10-year strategy statement on e-learning released in March this year, HEFCE says its new aim is to 'help the sector use new technology as effectively as they can, so that it becomes a 'normal' or embedded part of their activities'. It says it is about describing overall aspirations for how e-learning can transform learning and teaching, and about supporting institutions in setting their own visions and plans.

Six years ago there was no universal Virtual Learning Environment in The London Institute. The School of Printing at LCP (now LCC) was developing its first LCP Direct (now LCC Direct) online courses in close collaboration with industry using the WebCT Virtual Learning Environment.

In December 2000 the London Institute introduced Blackboard as the Virtual Learning Environment in its constituent colleges and since then each college, has been building up its portfolio of Blackboard sites.

Developing the prototype Virtual Newsroom as part of the University's Blackboard VLE

It seemed important then to develop the new prototype for the Virtual Newsroom as part of the University's Virtual Learning Environment.

The prototype could have been developed as a stand alone product but there were immediate advantages in staying with Blackboard. All journalism students at LCC had access. There was a built in management system already in place, login could be easily controlled and there was a system in place to deal with submitted work.

It was also envisaged that the Virtual Newsroom prototype's interactive 'timed update' facility, in effect a new Blackboard tool, would be adapted for use on other Blackboard sites across the college and University.

Another advantage in staying with the Blackboard environment was that I wanted to look at some of the tools already developed. Discussion groups, forums, audio/visual tools, self-evaluation packages are all aspects of the Virtual Learning Environment I wanted to explore, and believed would help me develop the idea of the Virtual Newsroom.

As part of this investigation I looked at a number of Blackboard sites across the university, particularly those experimenting with interactive software, some of which had been developed specifically by the University's ITRDU, and which might have an impact, long term, on the Virtual Newsroom project.

These included Paul Turner's site linked to the BTEC ND Fashion and Clothing course at the London College of Fashion, Alan Baines's site for BA graphic design students at Central Saint Martins, the site linked to the BA Interior and Spatial course at Chelsea, Chris Buller's site for Marketing and Advertising students at LCC and Andy Stiff's MA Digital Arts (Online) course at Camberwell. Apart from Andy Stiff's site, which was conceived as a wholly online course, all the other sites utilise Blackboard to add value to existing courses and are a form of blended learning.

All these sites have been created working in collaboration with central ITRDU or through drawing on local IT expertise as in the case of Chris Buller at LCC.

What's new about the new prototype ?

With the close collaboration of Chris Foster, a programmer and developer at the university's ITRDU, a new Virtual Newsroom prototype was created based on the original which utilised a timed - update tool and which had as content a set of exercises on the theme of the 'breaking story'. (A scenario is set up and the student receives a range of information with random timing. The student then produces a report to a set deadline, but in the process must constantly update the developing story.)

What's new about the new prototype is that it is much more flexible. It has an accessible administration layer where the teacher of journalism, with no experience of computer programming, but with a little IT experience, can go behind the scenes to change the timing, add or take away material from established scenarios or create whole new scenarios containing text, audio, pictures and video.

This is possible because the framework of the programme is built separately from the assets or content.

Testing the prototype on journalism students

The new prototype was tested on two groups of journalism students at the London College of Communication during the course of the fellowship. A group of second-year BA students and a group from the MA post graduate diploma course.

The sample of undergraduate second-year students was chosen because the original prototype exercise was designed with this specific group in mind and the new prototype utilises much of the same content. ‘Breaking story’ exercises have remained an important part of the second-year curriculum since the original experiment six years ago.

The MA sample was chosen by way of contrast with the first group. Breaking story exercises are also normally part of the curriculum with this group, but due to a particular set of circumstances it turned out to be a new experience for them.

Both groups contained some students whose first language was other than English.

Within the BA group, students found the programme easy to use. They found the presentation clear. Half the students found the help instructions useful, while the other half found the help unnecessary. Most said they found the exercise a realistic simulation of a sub editing task, with one student basing their comment on ‘real’ work experience. Another said the exercise was realistic and also fun.

Students said they would like to do more e-learning exercises because the practice was useful, particularly if they could access the programme at home. Asked what they liked best about the programme one said: “The suspense of the exercise. What would arrive next; (Would it be) a telephone call? An email? An eye- witness account?’

The MA group’s responses were similar to those of the BA group. Most found the programme easy to use although one person commented that they would have had difficulty if they had been unable to ask questions at the start. Another student didn’t ask any questions and failed to grasp the point of the exercise. Instead of submitting a final story to the deadline they submitted an updated story each time new information came in.

The MA students grew impatient waiting for new information, but the beauty of the new prototype is that timings can be easily changed by the tutor for future exercises – but only, of course, if the impatience is legitimate.

It was also possible to compare the BA students’ finished reports with those produced by their peers who had completed the exercise using more traditional methods of learning. The e-learning reports, I’m pleased to say, compared favourably and learning outcomes were maintained.

Testing the prototype on journalism educators

The new prototype then was a designed, built and tested package but I now needed to take the prototype to a wider group of journalism educators for comment and analysis.

I took advantage of my position as secretary and my membership of a journalism educators' network, the Association for Journalism Education (AJE) to distribute the programme for comment to journalism educators in institutions across the UK and Ireland. Twelve individual teachers of journalism from 10 institutions out of a possible 30 responded to my initial invitation to view and comment on the prototype.

Before distributing the programme colleagues at ITRDU worked with me on the best means of organising this initial distribution. I didn't want to give too much away, at this stage, but at the same time it was vital to encourage as much comment as possible.

All those who had shown an interest were given access to the University's Blackboard test site. The demonstration package contained a user's agreement; an introduction to the Virtual Newsroom idea; access into the prototype programme with fast and slow mode (to encourage as many as possible to try it); a video demonstrating the administration side of the programme (without actually allowing manipulation of that aspect of the programme itself). We also provided a questionnaire for anonymous comment and access to a discussion board, in the hope of stimulating some debate about the issues.

The questionnaire probed responses to the user friendliness of the product, its appearance, its appropriateness for training journalism students and whether it was a realistic simulation of a journalistic experience. Users were also asked to suggest ways of improving the basic programme and other ways it might be used.

There was a good response to the prototype in general. Those testing the programme found it easy to use, the presentation clear and the instructions useful. There was a difference of opinion about the visual appearance of the product. One user found the look and feel 'quite archaic' and not matching the standard of modern interfaces, while another found the interface, although not visually stimulating, nevertheless 'informative' - an aspect they thought more important.

Most found the exercise a realistic simulation of a sub editing task with one user commenting that it was 'frighteningly' realistic.

One user particularly liked the 'ringing phone' (even though, on the programme at the moment, it doesn't in fact ring). Text messages from reporters out in the field are interspersed with phone messages from an impatient news editor. Another user though, thought the phone messages too scripted and said there should have been more garbled and breathless updates from the news editor.

Asked what they liked best about the programme, users said they liked its 'simplicity and convenience', 'that it was "quite stimulating and useful in the way it replicated the tension of a newsroom situation". One user said 'It felt like I was in a newsroom just before deadline. There was a real sense of urgency with the clock ticking and information coming from various sources. It forces the student to adhere to deadlines because of the nagging editor, especially the message at the end".

Another commented: ‘My students need to do endless amounts of this, with increasing (built in) difficulty. To try and replicate it on paper is logistically very difficult. With very little work one can bundle together countless exercises (using this programme), which is exactly what they need.’

Suggestions as to ways of improving the basic programme were: ‘to include the facility to view a ‘good practice’ version of the article after submission and a facility for students to review their own and other students’ work’ One user thought there was too much information for students to absorb in the audio message from the news editor and even though it was possible to play it again, it might be better to warn students and advise them to take a shorthand note, which would also give this practice in this vital journalism skill. There was some concern that the typeface used for the text messages was too small and there was a danger of the sub editor missing things.

Among the general comments were: The project is “an extremely worthwhile venture that could have many benefits for the teaching of journalism.”

‘‘ This is an excellent teaching and learning tool. If it was available today I would recommend our journalism centre purchase the software to use with our next group of students.”

‘‘All sorts of people could use such a thing – there must be other subjects where you have to condense information against constraints of time or space. Law?”

Others said:
‘‘This is something we have talked about doing and it is great you have actually pulled it off. When can I use it with my students?”

‘‘Every journalism lecturer will want this. I’ve got computers, I’ve got Blackboard, but all we use them for is distributing and working on swathes of lifeless text. This would change all that. Congratulations and when can I have a copy?”

What’s already out there as regards e-learning for journalists?

As well as asking journalism lecturers in other institutions to try the prototype programme I was also eager to get a wider view of e-learning developments in other institutions. This knowledge was vital to establish if the Virtual newsroom idea was still sufficiently innovative.

I asked the AJE journalism education contacts how many were involved in similar projects? If they were involved in similar projects, were the e-learning packages being developed as part of their university's Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) or separately for CD Rom or as web sites? I also asked if any journalism department was buying in or using e-learning packages from other sources.

Few of the journalism educators who responded were actually involved in creating online learning materials themselves although some said they were being encouraged by their institutions to develop e-learning materials, or had thought of doing so individually.

Exceptions were Paul Bradshaw, from the University of Central England. He teaches online journalism using a content management system which students use to publish stories during live newsroom sessions.

Peter Dewrance from Lincoln University is developing e-learning materials for broadcast journalism. After producing a product for CD Rom he is now replicating the original features of product for the Web.

Colm Murphy an MA course director at the University of Ulster, and interestingly a graduate of the IMM MA course at LCC, has designed a programme around the Freedom of Information Act, FOIprofessional, The programme was built with the assistance of e-learning experts in Dublin and in collaboration with public service and media organisations. These organisations now extensively use the product.

Organisations pay a small licence fee, but the programme is free for students, charities and individuals. Among the users are investigative reporters from the main Irish media. In journalism education the programme is used by Dublin Institute of Technology and the University of Ulster. The software is also built to accommodate a UK and Scottish version which will be put online once case law and practice builds up following the introduction of the freedom of Information act in the UK in January 2005.

Colm says the programme was costly to develop and beta test. It is platform neutral and fits into WebCT, Blackboard and most other platforms. FOIprofessional was developed using bespoke software because it had to run from a central data base and have flexibility to upgrade easily and run from the Web.

Asked about e-learning packages being developed in his own university, Colm said The University of Ulster uses WedCT and has a comprehensive range of e-learning courses under its campusone brand. Most however are in areas such as nursing and social policy and not in journalism.

Contacts at the BBC

It was also important to look at e-learning packages being developed for journalists working in media organisations.

My search took me to the BBC's website and to the material produced by the Development and Training department. The department last year provided 3,814 courses for more than 22,000 people both within and outside the BBC. Most of these courses are face to face but an increasing number are online with a limited number available free for public consumption via the BBC website.

The courses I've seen so far, although restricted to what's available publicly on the website, utilise the BBC assets in providing a number of training modules mainly for the broadcast industry, although some of the courses cover more basic journalism training issues.

This aspect of my research turned out to be extremely timely as, following the Hutton inquiry, the BBC announced plans for a Journalism College to be set up within the organisation. This was officially launched on June 28, this year. A statement on the BBC's website said that the new training plans included a "virtual' College of Journalism.

I had contacted Nigel Paine, head of people development at the Training and Development department, at the start of this research in April, and he had confirmed that e-learning was an important part of the BBC's journalism training strategy. He put me in touch with Alex Gerlis, head of the BBC's Journalism Centre of Excellence. Gerlis agreed to meet me towards the end of June/early July when the situation concerning developments at the BBC was clearer. At that time he was waiting for the final approval from the BBC Governors on the College of Journalism which 'would obviously have a very big impact on future training plans'.

Meanwhile, on June 15, a team from BBC Training and Development visited LCC – two computer programmers/ developers and a learning executive for journalism and creative programme content. They toured the journalism facilities within the Media School and saw the college's LCC Direct - online learning unit. During the course of the visit they met; the dean of printing and publishing, the ICT academic co-ordinator at LCC, the dean of media, the acting head of ITRDU, the programmer and developer from ITRDU working with me on the Virtual Newsroom project, and me.

I gave a presentation on the Virtual Newsroom project and demonstrated the prototype. This was greeted with enthusiasm by the BBC team who particularly liked the flexible nature of the programme with its facility to insert new material.

I was subsequently invited by the learning executive to sit in on a training session at the BBC with a view to possibly developing similar course material for e-learning using the Virtual Newsroom prototype and my meeting with Alex Gerlis has recently been confirmed for July 19.

International contacts – The Poynter Institute

Parallel with my research into e-learning at the BBC was an investigation into the Poynter Institute's online training portal – NewsUniversity (NewsU).

I discovered NewsU, on the internet, just a few days before its official launch on April 11 this year. Poynter is a privately funded organisation in the United States offering training and education to journalists, future journalists and teachers of journalism. One of its biggest backers is the Knight Foundation who are supporting the NewsU project with a five-year grant of $2.8 million.
The launch statement for NewsU said that its Web site is designed to help journalists improve their work. NewsU, it added, was working together with leading journalism organisations to offer three types of e-learning: Self-directed classes that journalists can complete at their own pace; faculty moderated seminars and live seminars broadcast over the internet.

NewsU's modules range from how to improve basic reporting and writing, such as interviewing and leader writing, to visual journalism. There are also courses for newsroom managers. I was particularly interested in the levels of interactivity of the exercise 'Be a Reporter' which has resonances with my own prototype.

I then contacted Howard Finberg director for interactive learning at the Poynter Institute/NewsU giving him access to my prototype for comment.

His reply was to propose a meeting in London, during his visit to the UK to meet with the BBC and other media organisations. At our meeting I asked him about the state of play as regards e-learning in journalism schools in the US. He said although there were many fully online courses on offer from universities in the US in many subject areas, few were in the journalism area. Asked why News U then was offering one-off modules and not complete courses he said the main focus of NewsU at the moment was working journalists whose busy schedules did not allow them to get involved with long-term programmes.

Faculty members from a US journalism school, however, are involved in providing content for the NewsU modules. The educationalists help out with the learning objectives. Journalists on Knight Fellowships within the journalism schools are being encouraged to back the project.The flow of content though seems to depend on what each particular faculty has to offer.

Finberg was generally enthusiastic about the Virtual Newsroom prototype. He particularly liked the interactivity and flexibility of the programme. He was less enthusiastic about the Blackboard environment as a platform for the programme, seeing it as crude, and not particularly aesthetically pleasing front end. (NewsU sits on the Angel Learning platform/angellearning.com – which appears to be a more anonymous VLE). Although concerned about the design of the product, he was

nevertheless keen to show and discuss the prototype with his own developers on his return to the US.

He also talked about a possible partnership with the college and University as part of a plan to establish links in the UK and the rest of Europe in order to 'internationalise' NewsU. At the moment 75 per cent of traffic for the site is within the US and 25 per cent outside. He has concerns that NewsU is 'too American' and needs international partners.

He said Poynter and NewsU could offer: a testing ground with access to a wider pool of journalists and journalism educators: could help with development and with the design of product.

Although my research into what's out there as regards e-learning for journalists is by no means exhaustive, I was surprised by the relative lack of development in the journalism area.

Conclusions

Is the Virtual Newsroom idea then still at the cutting edge of online learning technologies for journalism in this country and beyond? Is it still an innovative and valid means of teaching journalism?

I have seen little evidence elsewhere of programmes for journalism students which meet the Virtual Newsroom prototype's level of interactivity. Those who have seen and tested the programme have also been particularly interested in the flexible nature of the product - a programme which has a framework separate from, but able to accommodate a changing flow of assets or content. I believe I have shown that the idea remains at the cutting edge of e-learning in journalism and remains an innovative and valid teaching tool.

If it is worth supporting then, and I believe it is, can the University's Virtual Learning Environment host, sustain and develop such a programme?

It has been demonstrated that the University's Blackboard VLE can host the Virtual Newsroom at least to the level of the present prototype. The programme would be part of the Blackboard VLE and can be immediately included as part of the curriculum of courses within the journalism department at LCC.

A further range of exercises with sound, visuals and video, could continue to be added to the present framework by myself or other members of teaching staff with minimum training and with the continuing support from a developer/programmer at ITRDU.

Whether the University's VLE, or a single journalism department, could continue to sustain and develop the project, however, is open to question.

The possible drawback is that, with the best will in the world, development would still move at too slow a pace and might be difficult to sustain. Teaching materials take time to develop and the project remains time sensitive, even though I seem to have been able to pick up and run with the idea after six years.

Other ways forward

Are there then other ways to develop the idea? One option would be to develop the present prototype to the point were it could be sold either to a software company or to journalism departments or other organisations in this country or internationally.

This option is perhaps worth considering following the interest shown by journalism institutions and media organisations so far and would ensure to some extent some kind of future for the idea. One of the disadvantages of such a commercial option might be that once out of our hands we would have no direct way of tracking any subsequent development.

A further option would be to take the project forward through partnerships with journalism departments and possibly other organisations and institutions such as The BBC and Poynter.

The University would set up a series of developmental partnerships with interested parties. We would distribute the prototype freely to this group, Each partner would need to be prepared to commit an agreed minimum of resources to the project. There would also have to be an agreed time span over which development could be measured.

The LCC/University of the Arts as lead partner would co-ordinate the project and report on the developments

To pursue this option however the prototype would need to be developed as a cross-platform product. It could not be tied to one VLE such as Blackboard.

Potential costs
What then are the potential costs of these options? All of course would involve some commitment of resources.

The first option would need continuing support for a content developer and a technical developer/programmer.

For the second option I understand (after a brief consultation with the Enterprise Centre at LCC) that there are resources available within the University, but a tightly

constructed business plan showing the true and positive potential of the product, would need to be first prepared.

The third option would involve the initial outlay to develop the product cross platform. And if we were to take on the role of lead partner we would need a co-ordinator for the project as well as a content developer and technical developer/programmer to fulfil our side of the partnership role.

All these options have some potential and future development will depend, not only on the University's interest in this single project, but also ultimately on higher education's e-learning strategy for the future.

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JULY 11, 2005