Deer in the headlights: Towards an understanding of how journalism students engage with complex academic research methods modules

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Abstract

Journalism is at a crossroads. The rise of populist governments with accusations of fake news against what has always been considered to be Fourth Estate journalism means journalists face significant challenges to produce compelling, truthful, and accurate news at a time when reality is altered by those who do not agree with what journalists say. The current journalistic climate means journalists must move beyond the lexical meanings of what it means to be a journalist to a more critical one where they have to verify and analyse the news for the audience. One of the key ways in which journalists can respond to significant challenges to practice is by becoming more critically aware practitioners. A significant step in that direction occurs in journalism programmes at university level where students are required to produce a critically researched dissertation as part of their conditions of earning a degree. However, with journalism being a traditionally vocational programme, challenges arise because students have difficulties drawing correlations between academic research and journalism practice. Our research aims to understand how students engage with academic research method modules. Based on our findings, we argue that students can use interactive learning methods and online resources to help engage with more complex and unfamiliar content.

Introduction

Journalism needs more critical thinkers now more than ever. One of the key formative functions of Western democratic journalism is the Fourth Estate in which journalists are tasked with holding authority to account (Deuze, 2005; Hampton, 2010). The current political climate threatens this ability because political leaders are discrediting and labelling journalists with whom they do not agree as being producers of "fake news". A prime example of this is

the way in which U.S. President Donald Trump argues that journalists and the news media are the "enemies of the people" and deliver "fake news". With contemporary challenges and a sophisticated audience in mind, today's journalist can not simply construct a version of reality based on a collection of facts, he or she must be able to identify, explain, and interpret complex subjects for the reader (Edwards, 2016).

Journalists in the UK can no longer rely on ethical conduct and industry codes as guarantors of best practice. They need to go beyond the surface meanings of information to comprehend motivations of authority figures and present a simplified, while at the same time accurate, version of reality for the audience (Edwards, 2016). The responsibility of reshaping how journalists think must originate at the pedagogical stage where a paradigm shift in how journalism is practised has to take place. This can be accomplished by offering opportunities to students to develop sound academic research skills. Today's editors are demanding data-literate reporters who can understand numbers and serious grounded academic statistics and research (De Burgh, 2003; Howard, 2014). In the past ten years, 2.5 exabytes of data has been generated with the amount doubling every four years (Howard, 2014). Current and future journalists must be able to understand how data, algorithms, and computers can be used to interrogate the mountains of data that is being generated (Howard, 2014). To be able to understand this, journalists must learn special skillsets that would have traditionally been reserved for academic researchers.

Journalism practice, in its traditional iteration, is no longer an option for practitioners. Journalists must be able to examine the facts critically because simple literal reporting of facts can do a disservice due to editorial errors that make their way into news copy (Edwards, 2016; Facione, Sanchez, Facione & Gainen, 1995). Critical thinking can be defined as reflective, purposeful thought process that takes into account professional knowledge, scenario knowledge, evidence, and research skills to provide a more holistic approach to understanding the social world (Facione, Sanchez, Facione & Gainen, 1995). One of the key challenges university educators face is teaching research skills to undergraduate students. Secondary schools do not prepare students to be more critical thinkers which is needed to successfully navigate method and methodology modules (McKenzie & Schweitzer, 2001; Aidan-Karademir, Deveci & Cayli, 2018; Almulla, 2018). In this article, we aim to understand and show how students assimilate into these types of modules and how they engage with research methods modules. Our goal is to present how students on vocational degrees, in which pedagogy is more focussed on *doing*, engage with teaching of academic research methods and skills.

Teaching academic research methods to undergraduate students in an engaging and relevant manner can be a challenge even to the most experienced lecturer (Lewthwaite and Nind, 2016; Roberts, 2016). One of the challenges facing educators is the difficulty some

students find in differentiating between journalistic and academic investigation. Often, students tend to choose interviews as a research method because of their understanding of interviews from a journalistic perspective without realising that the academic context of an interview is significantly different.

However, with academics and industry insiders calling for more critical thinkers, this article posits that equipping students with an understanding of a variety of research methods is important because it will create the shift in journalism practice from mere disseminators of news to journalists who are better equipped to interrogate data, analyse information, and check for veracity, provenance, authority, and credibility. Beginner research methods students either lack interest and motivation to learn a subject that they feel is not relevant to them, feel anxious or nervous about research methods courses and have a poor attitude towards research (Earley, 2014). Another challenge facing educators is to create a programme that is compelling and engaging while attempting to make students draw correlations between academic research skills and critical thinking development required for their future careers. This is situated in helping students to understand that critical thinking skills, developed from an understanding of academic research skills, are significant in helping them to develop story ideas in their journalism practice, become more autonomous journalists, and conduct effective investigations that go beyond daily reporting practices. This was a major challenge that the project, on which this article is based, aimed to overcome by adopting and testing three overlapping pedagogical goals: active learning, learning by doing and critical reflection (Kilburn et al., 2014).

The aim of the research project was threefold. The first aim was to develop a robust and user-friendly framework for engaging journalism students with a variety of methods that they normally tend to avoid, e.g. qualitative and quantitative analysis and social media data analysis. The second aim was to take this framework into the classroom and test it. For example, we explored different ways in which students can engage with and experiment with a variety of digital tools including Textalyser, Padlet, Google Team Drive and social media analysis (e.g. using free software Mozdeh). This gave us the opportunity to test student-centred approaches discussed in the literature that include co-operative and problem-based learning strategies (Bell & Pelko, 2006). We hoped that this would strengthen students' research method capabilities whilst also engaging them in technology-enhanced learning. There is limited literature on research method pedagogies specific to journalism studies and how to engage students in the research process — particularly undergraduates studying on degrees which are more oriented towards vocational skills. Therefore, our third aim was to address the gap in the literature and produce an original research paper based on observation and survey data with the students taking the "Researching Journalism" module in spring semester of 2018. The research question the project addressed was: "How to teach research methods to journalism students in an

engaging and relevant way?"

Our research involved observing how second-year undergraduate journalism students at Sheffield Hallam University interacted with a module that introduced them to the academic research process, research methods applicable to media and communication research, and data collection strategies. The module was designed to familiarise students with the skills needed to complete a third-year dissertation or practical project, which are an integral component of the undergraduate degree. The classes were meant to encourage them to think about potential projects, methods, and data collection tools that they could use in their own research projects. In this article, we will outline our academic inquiry by presenting an interrogation of the existing literature on journalism education, journalism education and academic skills, and philosophical discussions on education. Doing so will help us to provide the context for the research and to identify research gaps that exist. We will then outline our method and methodology. This will lead us to examine, interrogate, and analyse the data collected from our observational sessions and the survey students were asked to conduct.

Literature Review

Vygotsky's (1978) seminal work set the tone for an exploration with his theory of social interaction. He argued people learn on the social level then on a more reflective level from within the student. An objective of student workshop modules allows them to interact with the lecturer and their classmates to foster an environment for learning This is supported by Oliver, Markland and Hardy's (2010) perspectives on self-talk as a form of self-reflection. They used the concept of self-talk to shed light on Ball and Pelco's (2006) research into co-operative learning techniques. The study found that positive self-talk led to increased confidence among students to grasp complex concepts in research method modules.

There appears to be a shortage of research focused on understanding how journalism students engage with academic research skills modules. Key issues researchers have pinpointed in attempting to present why students have trouble with research methods modules are that students often fail to make correlations between journalism and education (Murthy, 2011; Baines & Kennedy, 2010; De Burgh, 2003) and the often complex material presented in research methods modules (Ball & Pelco, 2006). De Burgh (2003) argued that journalism education must move on from a vocational framework, where education is based on practical learning, to a critical framework, where theoretical perspectives are needed to provide analysis and to make sense of complex information. However, De Burgh (2003) did not address means by which journalism programmes can be improved, but rather focused on the role of the lecturer and the university as the conduits through which young people can free themselves of past socialisation and move towards more critical thought processes. He went on to argue that today's journalists

need to shift from being disseminators to becoming analysts who make sense of information for the audience. From the broader perspective, Ball and Pelco (2006) argued that co-operated learning approaches could help to ease the perception that learning academic research skills is difficult. They proposed that modules were conducted as a research project, instead of a traditional pedagogical process, however, their research does not show how participatory engagement in a research skills module translated into the content of the students' work.

Earley (2012) identified three potential areas of focus for research into student engagement on research methods programmes: a student-focused study that presents the characteristics of the students who take these modules; teaching methods; and content and programme objectives. Based on these themes, Earley (2012) argued more research is needed in areas such as course evaluation, and what and how students learn on these programmes. Existing research tends to be anecdotal regarding types of teaching methods, including: active learning (Polkinghorne & Wilton, 2010; Vandiver & Walsh, 2010); problem-based learning (Braguglia & Jackson, 2012); co-operative learning (Ball & Pelco, 2006); learning within a framework of community work in conjunction with classroom work (Rash, 2005); experiential learning (Strangman & Knowles, 2012), and; online learning (Schulze, 2009).

To understand how students engage with the content in research methods modules, a holistic approach to data is a key requirement for analysis. Lester and Harris (2014), for example, propose that psychological and sociological research methods should be used to take a more holistic approach to understanding how students engage with modules that focus on complex academic concepts such as research methods. Social perspectives such as gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and social class should be considered when aiming to understand student engagement (Lester & Harris, 2014).

There has been a shift in the focus of research from trying to understand student strategies for success, to university initiatives to foster a positive learning environment. Zepke and Leach (2010) attempt to find ways to improve student success based on focusing on how higher education institutions fostered retention, completion of programmes, and assisted with future employment of their students. This research examined universities in ten countries to develop a conceptual framework to understand student engagement based on understanding the universities' strategies. Themes identified included student motivation, the relationship between student and teacher, institutional support, and engagement in active learning. Findings of the study included the need to develop students' self-belief and to encourage students to work independently, re-assess their relationships with others, and reflect upon their achievements. There was also a need to understand that teachers are a key component of the engagement process and to examine the role of active learning in the classroom. Limitations to the study include an assumption that engagement is contingent on the institutions' ability to influence.

The study does not consider non-institutional factors such as health, childcare, family support, and community responsibilities. It also does not consider unique institutional contexts that advance student engagement.

Research into journalism students' engagement with academic subjects tends to be within a global context. Deuze (2006) conducted a theoretical study to present a global perspective on the structure and culture of journalism education. Some of his key considerations included trying to understand means of delivering journalism education content; visualising what characteristics future journalists should embody; and understanding what ideas influence journalism education. Deuze's (2006) research provides a good overview of the challenges of teaching journalism, but it does not explore how journalists engage with academic research methods and skills at the pedagogical level.

Previous studies advocate both qualitative and quantitative methods. Hanna and Sanders (2007) conducted a survey to understand how journalism students' objectives related to the content being presented in UK journalism programmes. A significant number of students stated they wanted to be journalists because of an interest in current affairs, interest in the content, and potential job satisfaction. Although the research sheds light on student motivation, it does not measure specific experience and engagement on journalism modules. The research does provide a starting point in terms of understanding why students enrol on journalism programmes, but it does not focus on specific reactions to more challenging modules such as more complex academic research classes. It was evident that a significant body of literature existed on the education of journalism students. However, we identified a gap and aim to make a contribution to literature related to teaching of research methods to undergraduate journalism students.

Method

We employed Hammersley and Atkinson's (2007) approach to ethnographic research. Through ethnography, it is possible to replicate real-world scenarios in which researchers can observe people in their natural world, unaffected by researcher biases or constructions (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). Doing so creates a more realistic overview of lifeworlds. Since we are interested in presenting student engagement with research methods modules, we felt conducting an ethnographic inquiry would be effective because we could observe students in a natural learning environment as they attempted to make sense of and understand academic research methods.

Data collection was based on observing how students engaged with teaching in their research methods module. Using the perspective of the non-participant observer, the researcher was positioned at the back of the classrooms and made notes based on how the lecturer

presented the material, how students interacted with the lecturer and each other, how long it took students to lose interest in the class if they did, and how room dynamics influenced the learning process. Hence, the emergent themes were not based on a questionnaire but were generated through the data analysis process.

In order to understand how students engage with the content, delivery of material, and the lecturer, ethnography provides an authentic fit because it closely resembles journalism practice. Similar to journalism practice, one form of ethnography, non-participant, observation, requires the researcher to observe and report on the interactions between research participants. There is, however, a significant difference between academic and journalistic investigation, although this can be bridged by social science as a toolkit that connects the two disciplines (Hermann, 2017).

Initially, our aim was to triangulate the data through focus groups. Due to a lack of student engagement in this approach, a survey was used to illuminate the ethnographic study. The survey (created using Survey Monkey) was a mixture of pre-set responses and questions that required students to write a paragraph or two as part of their reflection on the module. The survey presented a series of questions that required participants to either select a pre-determined response that best met their experiences as they related to the questions or to fill in a short response. Part 1 required students to reflect upon their time on the module to determine how much impact the module had on their academic lives, how they thought academia would impact on their careers, and how they found the overall module. Part 2 required students to reflect and rate various online resources used during the term and the different in-class exercises they were asked to complete. Part 3 required participants to assess and reflect upon the physical surroundings, the time allocated for the module, an evaluation of assessment process, and an overall evaluation of the module and its place in a journalism programme.

Despite offering incentives of Amazon vouchers, we found that the participant rate was still low but much more successful than our call for participants in the focus group. We chose surveys as the next best option to a focus group because they are inexpensive and very easy to create; they could allow us to cover a large number of topics as we did in short amount of time, and; they allow for a high level of interactivity with the participants (Jin, 2010; Ilieva, Barron & Healey, 2002; Cobanoglu & Cobanoglu, 2003). As a result of lower than expected numbers from the survey, we shifted our analytical strategy to one where the focus would be placed on the ethnographic data with the survey acting as supporting data.

Participants were required to take an academic research skills module as part of their undergraduate programme. The class was a prerequisite for the third-year dissertation project. in which students could either write a 6,000-word dissertation on a journalism topic or create a journalism project. Students in the module met once a week for a one-hour lecture. They were

then divided into three groups and allocated one of three, two-hour seminars held later in the week. During those seminars, students received further instruction on the lesson that week and then were given practical tasks to be completed in class time. The second hour was usually allocated for students to present the findings of their first-hour tasks.

Students were introduced to a wide range of research methods and analytical strategies. Students were introduced a variety of online resources. Google-Plus and Padlet were used as an extension of teaching to provide an interactive forum where students could post their ideas for potential research projects and educators could provide guidance directly to the students' posts. Twitter and Lexis-Nexis news database were introduced as research tools and resources.

Over a 12-week semester, we conducted ethnographic observations at eight seminars at various points throughout the 12 weeks in order to get a good understanding of how students engaged with teaching of research methods and the methods that were taught. During data collection, the observer sat at the back of the room, out of the way of the students. The first time the observer attended each of the three modules, the students were introduced by the lecturers and told about the study and what the observer was doing in the room. The students were encouraged to go about their work and not to pay attention to the observer's presence in the room. As the observer, the role was to record how the students interacted as a group, how they responded to the lessons individually, how many students attended each seminar, what were their genders, as well as the positive and negative ways in which they interacted with the curriculum. Other aspects that were observed were time of day of the seminars, description of the classrooms, and arrival of late students to the class.

In line with academic research ethics, anonymity was preserved through a more generalised approach to note taking (Grinyer, 2009). No names were recorded from the register roll. Survey participants were not asked to divulge any information that could indirectly identify them such as personal information, age, race, or personal circumstances.

Since we used a mixed-methods approach of ethnography and surveys for data collection, we used data transformation as our analytical strategy (Caracelli & Greene, 1993). Data transformation entails the conversion of one data type to another to facilitate a streamlined strategy. In our case, we transformed the quantitative data collected from our survey into qualitative data to use in conjunction with the field notes recorded from the ethnographic sessions. In their study to determine how rural families in Alabama interact with home visit programmes, for example, Larner, Nagy, and Halpern (1987) combined a quantitative method where home visitors used a scale to determine mothers' needs in relation to nine sets of criteria with data from an interview. The data from the interview was converted to a numeric system to pinpoint specific client characteristics to the client's participation in the home visit programme. In our research, the survey data was converted to qualitative data to identify, compare, and

contrast with the themes that had emerged from the ethnographic data.

Ethical approval was granted before the start of the data collection period. Students were made aware of the researcher's presence in the classroom every time ethnographic observation was being conducted and students were asked if they were comfortable with the researcher being in the room. Our positionality within the research played a significant role, not only in the traditional ways of wanting to see the results, but also as, respectively, a PhD candidate whose doctorate relates to the changing landscape of journalism practice and an educator tasked with raising the department's research profile. We felt that ethnography was the ideal means by which we would collect data over interviews because we felt that watching students in the classroom environment would be more effective than an interview where students may not be forthright with answers due to fears of how their standing in the classroom may be impacted. Essentially, we wanted to conduct the least invasive means of data collection while upholding the principle of minimum harm to our participants.

Findings

Ethnographic observations

As we stated in the methodology section, data collection comprised a series of eight ethnographic sessions and a student-completed survey. In this section, we will outline the main observations of the ethnographic component of the data. Based on an interrogation of the ethnographic data, two main themes emerged: interactive learning and engagement with curriculum (Table 1).

Interactive learning

Students tended to use the seminar time to work together to complete the practical exercises which were designed to help them understand complex research methods. One of the key observations that supports this is how students congregated in the classroom. Since the workshops were a chance for smaller groups of students to learn what was taught in a one-hour lecture, students tended to sit together in a roundtable format. This was easier to facilitate in the more technologically advanced room (TAR) used for the workshops because this classroom was not a classically arranged room (CAR). Round desks were set up with chairs around them. The CAR was a more conventional room in which desks were lined up in rows. Therefore, creating a roundtable environment in the TAR was easier to accomplish. In the CAR, students had to physically arrange tables to do so. The result was that only some of the groups tended to do this but only if the desks were already set up in such a manner. Otherwise, students tended to just sit next to each other in a more conventional formation and work this way.

In the TAR, all of the students tended to sit at the same desk unless there was an overflow of students which meant the latecomers would move to a different table. Within the groups, students created their own smaller groups of two to three students when they were asked to complete tasks. These groupings tended to be along social and gender lines. The subgroups were either composed of students who appeared to be friendly with each other or male-only and female-only groupings. From a gender perspective, female-only groups tended to work more closely as a team than the male groups. In the male group, the tendency was that the students worked independently within the group.

The time factor was a significant observation because students tended to lose interest and stopped paying attention about 70 to 90 minutes into the sessions. This was especially evident during the second half of the class when students presented their work to the class. As students presented their work, others tended to start talking with each other, looking at mobile phones, or looking at their computer screens.

Engaging with curriculum

In the workshops, the tutors would spend about half an hour reinforcing the week's main lecture. This was done by highlighting examples that would help students to become familiar with the subject content. Students were then provided about 45 minutes to complete in-class assignments, usually in groups, and then spent the remainder of the time presenting their findings to the class. Students appeared to engage better when technology was involved, such as using the online resources such as Google Plus, Padlet, Lexis-Nexis, Twitter, and online searches of news websites. In one week, students were asked to leave the classroom to observe people going about their daily lives in the rest of the building. This assignment tended to be received with a bit more difficulty. Based on students' reports, they tended to work on this exercise in groups instead of individually. The students demonstrated tentativeness about this type of assignment because they felt they were intruding into people's privacy even though they were told to observe people from a distance. In the second part of that assignment, the lecturer made subtle changes to the room, such as spraying a perfume, playing a radio at a very low volume, moving desks, and placing books on some desks. The tendency among the students was to start looking for differences based on observations made by some students such as "what's that smell" or "do you hear a radio in here?"

Evidence of critical learning became evident in Observation Sessions 3 and 4 where the class focussed on peer reviewing and creating robust research questions. Students tended to be able to interrogate their in-class assignment in a more critical manner. They were able to apply peer reviewing practices to aspects of their own lives. This ability to apply critical knowledge to interrogate aspects of their lives demonstrates that the students were able to understand how

to apply critical research methods beyond the theoretical learning of the classroom to more practical settings in their lifeworlds.

Module designers introduced online resources students could use to help them map out their understanding of research methods. Using Google Plus and Padlet, students had the opportunity to interact with their tutors even outside of classroom sessions to shape the scope of their dissertation research questions and to understand how academic research moves from the planning to the implementation stages. Students tended to find the exercise engaging because they saw it as a chance to receive feedback from the lecturers directly. Through the resources, they could post online comments and have a record of how their interactions occurred, which meant they could have a visual script of how they shaped the scope of their research.

An interesting observation was that students tended to become more engaged in activities that required them to use computers. This was seen in a surge in enthusiasm to find examples of journalistic articles on academic research or interacting with lecturers through Google Plus. However, there was a sense of a lack of interest when the students were asked to leave the classroom to conduct observational ethnographies in the university building. They tended to take time to leave to go on their assignment and there was also a tendency for them to go out in groups. This was further evidenced during the presentations when students referred to "we observed" rather than "I observed". In the critique part of the lesson, the students tended to be extremely critical of observational ethnography because they felt they were somehow intruding on people's privacy.

Survey data

The survey consisted of 19 questions divided into three sections: general questions; practice and activities, and; teaching spaces, resources, timing, and assessment. The rest of this section will be used to outline the trends in how students responded to each question.

Of the 11 students who participated in the survey, 45.5 percent of the respondents had no prior experience with academic research while those who had basic experience in research methods were about the same composition with 18.2 percent.

The majority of respondents (45.5 percent) chose answer B which was that they had a good understanding of one or two research methods to help them narrow how they wanted to do their dissertation research. None of the respondents stated that they were still uncertain of research methods or had a plan for how they wanted to conduct their research.

The responses demonstrated that the module was well received because about 82 percent of the respondents found the module to be either very helpful or somewhat helpful as they prepare for academic research. The remaining 18 percent either found the module not helpful

at all or somewhat helpful and still needed to do a lot of independent work to understand what research strategy they wanted to undertake.

> Question 4: Has this module changed the ways in which you think of research or even just the way you perceive things as a future journalist? Please explain how.

Unlike the previous three questions, this one required a short response from the students. Student responses included profound career reflection where participants were positively influenced by the module that they were reconsidering their career goals.

> This module definitely spiked my interest a lot more in academic research, as opposed to simply working as a journalist. It's even made me consider looking at academic research roles after graduation.

However, most were more moderate which was evidenced by an acknowledgement that a comprehension of academic research methods had real-world applications to journalism practice.

> "No, I did sociology and methods which covers all the research techniques that were shown in this module. Although, it did help remind me."

> "I definitely feel like this module has improved my academic writing and understanding of research methods. I have learnt a lot from this module."

> "Didn't know much about research before this module now I have a much better understanding"

> "Research is a lot more difficult than I first imagined. It takes a lot of time and cost to get quality results."

> "It has taught me not to assume that things are right, and to discover where information came from."

> "Understand now that a lot of different methods can be needed to conduct a study, not just one set method for all of it."

"This module has given a lot more knowledge on the whole area of researching and will hopefully have changed the way I research from now on."

In one instance, there was an outright dismissal of the module as not being a benefit to journalism training.

"No not really – I struggled to see how this module related to being a journalist."

It was evident that the module invoked a wide range of reactions in students about the effectiveness of the programme to develop critical thinking skills in future journalists. A majority of students (54.5 percent) felt the module would be very influential because they were able to draw correlations between a programme on academic research skills and the benefits it would have in making them into more critical journalists. About 27 percent felt there was merit to the module because it would guide them to ask more effective questions as journalists. About 18 percent felt the module was not important to them because they thought that the type of journalism they wanted to practise does not require critical thinking.

Question 5: What did you like or dislike about this module?

Here are some examples:

At the beginning I found it a bit difficult to grasp why we had to take this module. I understand now how it is relevant to my course and I'm glad that I learned about it. I knew that this would focus on my work next year as well. It took me a while to understand the difference between an applied project or a dissertation. I liked the teaching methods.

There was nothing I disliked about the module. However, I feel for students looking at projects, there wasn't enough content for them.

Disliked literature review
The beginning was fairly complex and threw people off at times. Breaks in between to digest what we had learned and to make sure it was fully understood would have been useful.

Being critical and thinking about other sources.
I feel like there should of been more opportunities to attend possible extra drop ins which explained things in more depth/clearly as I struggle at grasping new things especially when there is an offload of a very large amount of information all at once (and this happened every lecture/seminar)

I liked how the module was broken down and structured into specific sections each being equally important to understand researching and its methods properly.

Slightly more student responses pointed to a focus on what students did not like about the module. These ranged from uninteresting delivery of content to a need for extra opportunities to understand the complex content of academic research. The positives tended to focus on the student's interest in the content and the way in which they were able to engage with the content.

Practice and activities

Section 2 of the survey required students to rate their experiences of online resources from 1 (very helpful) to 5 (not helpful at all). Students tended to rate the Google Plus hangout, where they could receive direct feedback on their proposals, favourably as more than 60 percent rated it between very helpful and somewhat helpful. No student rated it as not being helpful. Student experience with Padlet tended to be more negative with a shift towards not helpful in their learning experience (35 percent). No student rated Padlet as very helpful. Google forms received favourable ratings with more than 60 percent rating it between very and somewhat helpful while one student rated it as not helpful at all. The majority of respondents saw merit in online analytical tools, such as Textalyser, Tags, and Twitter, which received more than 63 percent of the responses.

The second half of the practice and activities section required students to reflect upon practical assignments completed in the classroom. While the majority of students found the ethnographic exercise to be worthwhile, it was only slightly more than the number of students who felt that they were invading people's privacy and were uncomfortable with the exercise. The data was also not conclusive in terms of how students responded to a question about the experiences of conducting content and discourse analysis, creating interviews, peer reviewing, and creating surveys. While 54 percent of the students felt it was adequate with the amount of time they had, 27 percent felt they needed more time while another 20 percent were not quite sure.

Teaching space, resources, timing, and assessment

Section 3 was focussed on the holistic aspects of the module such as the classroom environment, access to learning resources, amount of time spent learning, and overall self-reflection. For context, the three workshops were held in two different buildings on the university campus. Two of the workshops were held in the university's newest, most technologically advanced building in which the classroom was geared towards a more collaborative learning environment with roundtables and a laptop bank in the room. The third workshop was held in the faculty building for the journalism programme, but the laptop bank was located on the ground floor, not in the classroom. It appeared that students who worked in the modern workspace were at an advantage because of their ability access the technology within the room compared to those in the less advanced room who had to go to a different part of the building to get computers which wasted the time they could use for learning. Those who worked in the journalism faculty felt it created a sense of familiarity for them because a significant number of their other modules are delivered in the same building.

The students were asked to reflect upon the amount of time allocated for the lecture (one hour) and for the workshop (two hours). There was a somewhat significant consensus that the balance was the right amount of time to be allocated to the module with almost 55 percent of the students responding this way. This confirmed the ethnographic observation that students tended to have a high level of attention in the class which waned after the first hour. As stated in the ethnographic notes, the format of the class was that students were taught in a traditional pedagogical format for the first half of an hour. They were then tasked with an assignment for the next 45 minutes and the final component was a chance for students to present findings from their assignments. Attention spans tended to wane during the presentation portion of the lecture. Much lower at 18 percent each were respondents who felt it was either too much time or too little time for a module of this nature. Students were then asked to evaluate who they thought should benefit from the class. The majority (55 percent) felt the module was best suited for those students who wanted to write a dissertation and not for those who opted for the project route. About 27 percent felt that it was of benefit to all journalism students.

Discussion and conclusion

Despite the small number of participants in the survey, the trends revealed in the survey tended to support the observational notes from the ethnography. The majority of students found it difficult to understand how the module related to their vocational training as journalists. Most of the criticism of the module suggested that students found it difficult to comprehend the complexity of academic research in a programme where they were training to become journalists. This suggests that students were not properly prepared to look beyond the lexical

understanding of journalism to the critical paradigms future journalists should be equipped with to engage in contemporary journalism (Edwards, 2016; Howard, 2014; Murthy, 2011; Baines & Kennedy, 2010; DeBurgh, 2003).

The more positive results demonstrated that there was some progress in the way in which students engaged with the complex content associated with understanding research methods. The two key themes that emerged from the data focussed on how students made sense of the content through interactive learning approaches and how they engaged with the content. This research follows up on Earley's (2012) arguments of how future research into student engagement should be conducted. Earley (2012) proposed that research could focus on the characteristics of the students who take the modules, teaching methods, or the content. Due to the methodological approach adopted in our research, we chose to focus on the teaching methods and content which matches the two themes that have emerged in this research.

Our teaching method was to produce a one-hour lecture for the entire class and then one, two-hour workshops where students, allocated to one of three smaller groups, could spend more time applying the theoretical knowledge to a variety of scenarios. Data evidence supports the pedagogical strategy of conducting the two-hour weekly workshops where students were tasked with carrying out small research projects, such as evaluating how legacy media presents scientific research data; conducting digital ethnography, such as analysis of Twitter or other social media streams; and carrying out ethnography where students were asked to observe people within the university building. Based on our survey data, we were able to observe that students felt they benefitted from the module and could understand how lessons could help them to become more critical journalists.

Students tended to be more critical of the ethnographic exercise because they felt they were invading people's privacy even though they were not interacting with the people they were observing. This was a significant finding because, while we conducted ethnographic research of them in the classroom with no objections from the students, they felt discomfort when asked to do the same of people in the building. Although they could understand how research methods can influence their journalistic practice, they could not see the correlation between them as the research subjects in this research and them as the observers in their exercises. We argue that non-participant observation was a challenge for students because it contradicted previous journalistic learning where students' comprehension of journalism was that human interaction and communication was favoured over observation from a distance.

Therefore, a reason why students felt uncomfortable about recording behaviour without interacting with the subject related to an understanding that ethical practices in journalism require journalists to seek permission to interact with people either through photography or interviews. Public observation would therefore feel uncomfortable for the students because

they felt they were intruding on someone's privacy. This was due to students not realising that journalistic ethics and academic ethics have very different dimensions despite having a dedicated classroom seminar on research ethics. While they may be taught that journalists must seek permission before recording information, one of the cruxes of ethnographic research is being allowed to collect data by observing natural habitats. While researchers usually are required to disclose their intentions, this idea of observing is still one to which journalism students had a difficult time adjusting.

The observational data showed there was more enthusiasm among the students when research required the use of computers. This was also supported by the survey data that showed robust support for the online resources students had a chance to try. Despite a small majority of students who found the engagement with the content to be negative, those who found it positive supported their arguments by pointing out the combination of a traditional lecture and an interactive workshop worked to help improve their comprehension of complex academic research methods. This supports Lundvall's (2016) argument that traditional pedagogical methods need to be complemented by interactive forms to provide students with vision and critical understanding of the various layers of the module's content.

Engagement with critical thinking and research methods was most evident when students applied the theoretical component of the coursework by conducting their own investigations. This aligns with Wang, Hoo and Zhao (2009) who argued that interactive learning requires four types of engagement: learner-content, learner-learner, learner-instructor, and learner-interface. In the scope of our research, we pinpoint learner-content as occurring in the lecture where students are introduced to the content. The next three are more evident in the workshop where students work in groups on assignments, then present those assignments, and reflect on how the content plays a role in how they will conduct their own research in the final year.

Although students were keen to work in groups to understand the complex concepts of academic research methods, there was a sense of frustration among students in the survey. While students acknowledged the benefits of the module, many appeared to find the content frustrating as evidenced by a significant percentage of responses that suggested some students did not see any value in the module or that they found the content to invasive (ethnographic exercise) or difficult to comprehend (discourse analysis). A significant argument that challenged the design of the module was that it was not conducive for those students who wanted to do a project instead of a dissertation in their final year of study.

Ethnographic data demonstrated that shorter workshops may be more effective for student engagement. The tendency among students was that they lost interest about 90 minutes into a 120-minute module. This was evidenced by various ways in which the students disengaged with the class through talking with classmates while others were talking about their work, checking

mobile phones, or surfing the internet on their computers.

Understanding how journalism students engage with complex academic research modules is a work in progress. Our initial foray into the field of study demonstrated that despite the vocational nature of journalism undergraduate programmes, students do present evidence of engaging with complex academic research concepts. This was evidenced by survey participants who stated that they felt they learned enough about research methods to organise and present a proposal for a research strategy for their dissertations. Future research is needed to provide educators with a framework from which they can work to convey to their students that learning about academic research methods is no longer a means to help them with their dissertations, but a pathway towards being a more critically-aware journalist.

The onus remains on lecturers to justify why being a critical journalist is significant especially in the current climate where political leaders challenge seemingly verifiable facts. In other words, journalists must be more accountable than ever because of challenges to practice from people who disagree with journalists. This would suggest a shift from a vocational perspective on journalism education underpinned by a framework of *how* to practise journalism to a more theoretical one that is informed by providing an understanding of *why* journalism is practised.

Our findings reinforce the need for further exploration of transformative pedagogical approach to journalism education. Previous work in the field tended to focus on how journalists could explore crises in democracy (McLaughlin, 1994) or ways of exploring if traditional methods are educating new journalists (O'Donnell, 2007). However, in the changing landscape of journalism practice, it is evident that transformative pedagogical approaches, from the position of challenging students to examine their belief system, values, and knowledge could provide a reflective environment for students to contemplate their positions of journalists within a landscape that requires more accountability of them.

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