



## LEARNING MATRIX

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### Learning Multimedia Skills in the Field: enhancing employability among Journalism students

Wendy Sloane  
London Metropolitan University

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#### Introduction

The most effective way Journalism students can grasp material is to *learn by doing* – “practice, repetition, trial and error, learning through experience” (Race, 2010), which is also a highly effective method of increasing their employability. Second-year Journalism students do this during *Newsroom Production* (SJ5036), a practical, hands-on core module focusing on the acquisition of print and multimedia skills. Student work eventually feeds into our own online student news site, *Holloway Express*, a task accomplished, in part, by three three-hour and six seven-hour “newsdays” held during the course of the module, giving them experience, skills and an online portfolio of multimedia work to show future employers.

#### Context

Newsdays are, in effect, workplace simulation where students replicate the work done in newsrooms all over the world. The final goal for this module was to produce online products, complete with multimedia elements such as copy, video, images, podcasts, slide shows, infographics, and interactive maps. In previous years at London Met, newsdays were only three hours long. The extended newsdays started this year as part of a requirement towards the BA Journalism course gaining an accreditation by the Broadcast Journalism Training Council, or BJTC (BJTC, 2016).

The accreditation requires, in part, a minimum of fifteen six-hour news days, culminating in a polished product that is either in print or online, on radio or TV, per year during the second and third years. BJTC guidelines state: “Each student must be given the opportunity to acquire and enhance his/her technical skills, both in an individual capacity and as a member of a team, in the context of practical workshops,” adding that newsdays should “produce a daily output consistent with industry practice in the particular medium or media” (Hill, 2014).

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In today's cut-throat world of multi-skilled journalists, students must be prepared. The Newsroom Production module seeks to mimic the real-life employment sagas students will eventually face, and teaches them to succeed. To accomplish this, we treated the module – and students – as if they were real journalists working in a real newsroom. PD James (2010) said, "Learn to write by doing it. Read widely and wisely. Increase your word power. Find your own individual voice though practicing constantly."

### Getting a Job: The Interview Process

During the first part of the module, students applied for editorial jobs: Managing Editor, News Editor, Features Editor, Sports Editor, Production Editor, Reporters and Sub-editors. Then they had a formal job interview with a tutor and member of the London Met Career services team. To prepare, they learned to write a CV and cover letter, and they practiced interviews with student feedback.

Students were judged on the following:

- CV and Cover letter
- Impression and appearance
- Knowledge of job
- Evidence of key skills and attributes
- Knowledge of news and current affairs
- Creative ideas
- Knowledge of subject area
- Knowledge of self

Areas in which some students did not do well included the following:

#### *Knowledge of news and current affairs*

Students were asked about timely topics, including a parliamentary decision on air strikes in Syria. Some gave obviously rehearsed answers, while others knew the intricacies of the argument. Some Fashion Marketing/Journalism students said knowledge of politics was unimportant.

#### *Knowledge of subject area*

Students were asked in detail about the job for which they were applying. Some were woefully unprepared: when asked how it could be improved, a Production Editor 'hopeful' admitted that she had never looked at the site before.

Many students did not realise that being an all-rounder is vital. Some only gave fashion or sports news. Others had no idea where the Q came across well – but few lived up to their potential.

Students eventually received one-to-one feedback. They were provided with a checklist of areas in which they needed to improve, to facilitate updating their CVs and cover letters, which made up part of their first assessment.

### Newsdays: Mimicking a Real Newsroom

Once jobs were allocated, newsdays began. After two three-hour preparation days followed by three-hour newsdays the following week, the seven-hour newsdays began. They started with an editorial conference where students submitted story ideas to editors. They researched, reported and interviewed on a story, then uploaded podcasts, infographics, online polls, interactive maps, slide shows, tweets etc. to accompany their written work.

This exercise mimics a real newsroom environment. We do what a real local news outlet would do: we send students to cover local events, news conferences and feature ideas, and dispatch them to Magistrates and Crown courts (Banks, 2009).

It is hard not to engage in such a fast-paced and competitive environment, where the best articles are chosen to be profiled on the site, and where one with too many mistakes or legal issues may never make it up at all. Newsdays "reflect a particular working practice most commonly associated with mainstream media where students work in a centralised newsroom. From personal experience I have found that newsdays develop a range of important employability skills including team working, group communication and project planning" (Hill, 2014).

### Assessment

To keep students on their toes, assessments feed into newsdays. First was the submission of the final CV and covering letter, along with a 500-word commentary reflecting on the application and interview process. The second tied in with the first three-hour newsdays; students laid out a print newspaper using InDesign, learning print skills before moving on to digital. They also proved they had fulfilled their editorial roles by use of an online Weblearn production journal, providing evidence of fulfilment of each of the roles and responsibilities specified in the job descriptions. They were urged to make particular reference to their most successful and challenging contributions, and suggest areas for improvement.

The third assessment was another production log reflecting on Holloway Express, along with a two-minute video pitch and 300-word document pitching an original idea for a journalism project at a specified publisher, broadcaster or financier. This year, pitches ranged from looking at why black wrestlers are largely portrayed as



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at how betting agencies bypass compliance measures. Last year, a student who pitched an idea for a documentary on London's gay Jamaican dance halls received a production commission from Vice magazine; it received an award at the Copenhagen International Film Festival this year.

### Challenges

A number of challenges become apparent. Firstly, in an ideal world, students would sub-edit their articles then release them onto the forward-facing website without tutor oversight. We encountered two problems with this. Due to the diversity of our students, a significant proportion speak English as a second – or third – language. Student sub-editors did not always edit to a professional standard, often relying too much or too little on the spell-checker (Hicks, 2010). Libel is also a real issue, although learning about libel, defamation, copyright and licensed image sourcing is embedded in the module. We decided it best to have tutors check content before the site goes live, especially with the ever-popular court reporting (Banks, Hanna, 2010).

Deciding what to cover was difficult. Students could not write about “student” events as Holloway Express should benefit the entire local community (Islington and surrounding boroughs), and as being too insular is frowned upon by the BJTC. Although we have almost two million views, we have neither the resources nor student numbers to compete effectively with local news agencies, although some other university sites do. Setting up a local Tweet deck helped immeasurably.

Trying to focus the attention of the less able – and less interested – students was ongoing. Tutors tried to encourage independence, which meant giving them a deadline and hoping they delivered, without us hovering. Some students took two-hour lunch breaks; others worked hard non-stop (Kocic, 2016). To address this, we provided a checklist during the early newdays to focus students on work. It asked them to provide the article headline, standfirst (an introductory summary of the piece), and quotes (at least two per article), listing the interviewee’s first name, surname, age and profession, as well hyperlinks and other multimedia. Next year, the practice of ‘phone-bashing’ will be embedded in the module, to prevent students from firing off an email requesting an interview, then sitting for hours awaiting a response.

At the moment, our Newsroom is lacking basic amenities, which are also a requirement for the BJTC. Our advisory panel of leading industry professionals (including editors from the BBC, Sunday Times and Evening Standard) say we should be moving towards an integrated newsroom for all formats of content, and students have suggested that we acquire additional software to enhance high quality graphics, all of which may be impossible due to financial constraints.

### Feedback from students

Students said the newdays improved as the module went on, both how they were run and their acclimatisation to them. Similarly, many thought learning *InDesign* was a pain at first, but later realised its usefulness.

They were also given a standard Journalism module feedback form and were asked to comment on the most interesting aspect of the module. The newdays and opportunities to gain multimedia skills and newsroom experience were highlighted:

*“Learning the multimedia and the newdays to see what it is really like.”*

*“Getting multimedia for the online stories.”*

*“The newdays and Enhancement Week were the most interesting”*

*“The newdays. Really interesting to be in a news room in real conditions.”*

### Conclusion

Newdays teach students what it’s really like to be working journalists. In future we will also require students to establish a social media profile when they work on their CVs, as suggested by our External Examiner. As part of the interview process, tutors will help students put together an online portfolio website (Garrand, 2006) which will have links to their blogs, twitter feeds and CVs. They will post their *Holloway Express* articles on these portfolios.

Our Advisory Panel have praised the work we’ve done so far with newdays, but recommend that we continue to encourage students to use the broadest range of multimedia tools. They are learning, and we can learn from them too.

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### Biographical note

Wendy Sloane is Senior Lecturer (Journalism) at London Metropolitan University. She holds a BA in Russian and Politics from Mt Holyoke College, a Master's in International Affairs from Columbia University, a PGCert in Teaching and Learning (distinction) from London Met, and is an HEA Fellow. She has spent more than 25 years as a journalist, starting as a reporter-researcher for Time Magazine in New York and Vienna before moving to the USSR, where she wrote for the Associated Press and Daily Telegraph, among others, covering stories such as the Soviet collapse and the war in Chechnya. After arriving in the UK in 1996, she was Deputy Features Editor of *Marie Claire* magazine, Deputy Editor of *Eva* and Deputy Editor of *Woman's Own* before moving into freelance fulltime, writing for both magazines and newspapers.