

Online Journalism Education: Reaching and teaching globalised media

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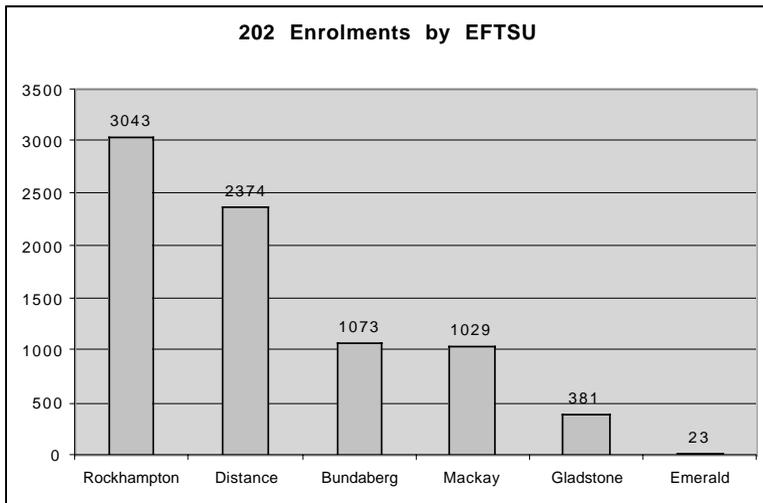
This paper considers how digital convergence of text, audio and image on the net might impact on the content, structure and delivery of journalism education. It will review course development at Central Queensland University where online journalism programs have been unfolding for two years. It will consider the construction of an action research project, examining how online delivered, industry mentored programs might be funded, offered and organised for journalism students located in widely disparate regional locations. The project, centred on the regional city of Emerald, will review how online distance learning materials might be delivered face to face to remote students brought together by data base analysis, internet interactivity and other online resources.

Central Queensland university

Central Queensland University is Australia's most geographically disparate and ethnically diverse, regionally based university. It operates over ten Australian campuses and four overseas franchises. Almost fifty percent of CQU's 18000 students were in 2002, foreign, fee-paying visitors, drawn from the Asian Pacific region. These students were primarily located in Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane and the Gold Coast. International students received external courses and programs delivered by locally hired tutors. Courses were conceived, created, administered, moderated and examined from Rockhampton.

In 2002, 38 percent of domestic students were located in Rockhampton with lesser populations in Mackay, Bundaberg, Gladstone and Emerald. Eighty five percent of CQU academics and administrative staff and all but two of the professors continued to be employed at Rockhampton. All Deans and most senior management were also located in Rockhampton.

Queensland regional campuses were initially conceived as feeder operations; offering first year only. The second phase of evolution began in 1995 when some full programs were commenced. Currently there is a mix of programs which can be completed entirely on-campus; those where certain specialisations need supplementation with ISL or other delivery; and a lesser number of programs which are limited to first-year.



In practice, this has meant that domestic students frequently had to transfer to Rockhampton to enrol in advanced programs or complete their programs. In some programs, they are able to enrol externally. Neither alternative was entirely satisfactory for the students involved.

In its Strategic Plan, CQU sought to apply new distance teaching methods to draw together these diverse and in some cases divergent strands, and re-affirm its regional base, which remained couched in Queensland government legislation.

Our vision is to be:

A unified university
Acknowledged universally as a leader
in flexible teaching and learning and
well focused research
Acknowledged as contributing strongly
to the sustainable development of the
communities and regions in which we
operate.
(CQU's Draft Strategic Plan, 2003).

CQU JOURNALISM

CQU began teaching journalism, more than a decade ago. Courses were located in Rockhampton and delivered by conventional face-to-face lectures and tutorials. Journalism was offered within a Bachelor of Communications program, which also featured cultural studies, communications theory and film studies. The appointment of a Chair of Journalism and Media Studies in 1998 allowed the creation of a plan to develop journalism teaching and learning at CQU.

Brendan Nelson, the federal Minister for Education, recognised this year that regionally based universities such as CQU had special responsibilities to rural communities. In "Our universities: backing Australia's future", he said that it was neither desirable nor necessary for all universities to be the same. "A more diverse system will be achieved by institutions forging distinct missions within the overall system and through greater collaboration between individual universities and other education providers, industry, business, regions and communities," Dr Nelson said.

So how might diverse courses including journalism, be delivered to disparate domestic and international campuses?

CQU journalism has developed an evolving program to place journalism

within CQU's strategic objectives, aiming to offer journalism to CQU's communities, by using internet delivered resources, courses (units) and programs (degrees).

The elements of this plan were as follows:

Course Rewrites

Courses were re-written to reflect recent industry experience and contemporary practices. *Principles of Journalism*, which had been offered to international students, was eliminated after it was discovered to contain parochial and borderline racist material. New courses, such as *Reporting Asia Pacific*, were created to inform students of Asian regional issues, using online Asian newspapers as sources.

Appointments

New academic staff were required to have both professional experience and academic qualifications. Staff with Masters qualifications was encouraged to upgrade to a Doctorate. Unqualified permanent staff were retired or re-deployed. Unskilled casual tutors were replaced with working journalists.

Journalism Centre

Exploiting an urban renewal project in central Rockhampton, journalism was relocated to a former magistrates court, which was renovated to include an electronic newsroom, a digitised broadcast training studio and a tutorial room. Academic staff offices opened onto student work areas. The court building was a short walk to the local commercial and community radio station, the ABC and Rockhampton's *The Morning Bulletin*. The new centre provided a focus for the introduction of digitised equipment and allowed the abandonment of most analogue production systems.

eJournalism

The term eJournalism was adopted to reflect the industry wide tendency for text, audio, and television journalism to converge on the Internet. New courses including *Online Investigative Journalism* were created to emphasise the importance of computer skills to contemporary, advanced journalism techniques.

A specialist librarian from University of Queensland, Belinda Weaver, was engaged to locate and select online resources such as certified web sites and create specialist lists appropriate to the courses.

The Internet was to become a source for references, an object of research, a mode of communication and way of delivering courses. The theme coincided with the activities of the host faculty, which brought journalism and media studies together with Information Technology and Information Systems (Informatics).

eJournalism.au.com

A website was created in 1999 to provide information on staff, courses, program and equipment. The 150-page site was progressively expanded to include resource indexes, information on student activities and research material. (<http://www.ejournalism.au.com>)

Industry Involvement

Local newspaper and television editors became involved in regular reviews of course material. Their staff were employed as specialist tutors in broadcasting, newspaper production, reporting, feature writing and photography. Work experience was incorporated through informal links with tutors and specific, project oriented courses (Communications Project). The current Editor of *the Rockhampton Morning Bulletin*, John Schlach, a regular first year journalism tutor, enrolled in a research program (Master of Communications) created to help industry professional achieve academic qualifications.

Research

A post Doctoral Fellow, with a specialism in Chinese journalism, was appointed in 2002. A refereed online scholarly journal, eJournalist, was created to encourage publications, and in doing so, attract federal research revenue. The journal was established online, to allow the easy dispersal of information to a geographically disparate staff and students. Rockhampton based researchers were encouraged to attend regular research work shops which provided practical support for developing research projects. Advanced researchers were invited to attend Australian Research Council grant development sessions.

New programs

Three new eJournalism courses; a Bachelor's degree, a Diploma and an Advanced Diploma were created in 2002. These courses, which could be completed externally, were constructed so that the Diplomas acted as exit points for the Bachelor's program. The latter degree included compulsory introductory multimedia courses to provide basic web construction skills. The degree was transdisciplinary, requiring a double

major in journalism, but allowing sub majors in courses in other faculties, including indigenous studies , human movement (sport), geography (environment), business, information technology and multimedia.

Articulation

CQU reached an articulation agreement with the private distance education provider, the Australian College of Journalism. The arrangement allowed College students to extend their journalism studies beyond the Certificates and Diplomas offered by the College itself. In return, the College promoted CQU programs in advertising.

Online Delivery

CQU journalism, working with the university's multi media team, in 2001 developed a website template which allowed most journalism courses to be progressively offered in *Flex* (external) mode. The online offerings immediately took journalism beyond the Rockhampton base, doubling enrolments in some courses. The highly structured, interactive, Internet resourced courses facilitated the employment of industry-based tutors in other regional centres.

THE EMERALD PROJECT

Emerald, which lies about three hundred kilometres west of Rockhampton, is CQU's smallest (less than thirty students) and most remote campus. The small student population makes it almost impossible to sustain cohorts through advanced courses, forcing most of the remaining students to enrol in flex (external) mode or simply move to Rockhampton.

The Emerald journalism project seeks to service students by drawing on international experience, by hiring local tutors to service externalised courses (subjects). However in this case industry based journalists would be hired to mentor whole cohorts engaged in online delivered programs (degrees).

This project fuses previous research related to online delivery, and mentor supported programs. It applies Action Research to regional students at the undergraduate level. In doing so it contributes directly to CQU strategies and addresses the Nelson Report objectives. In addition it proposes and tests the development of an innovative approach to enhancing self-directed learning.

The Diploma, Advanced Diploma and Bachelor of e-Journalism have been offered at the regional campuses since 2001 and have the support of the local media industry. Delivery and support has been by e-mail discussions, fax, e-mail, telephone and study packages.

Student numbers have been consistent and attrition has been minimal. However, student evaluations of distance course (flex) have rated the item "I felt I belonged to the University community" very low (DTLS, 2003).

Journalism staff, in seeking to improve their program and enhance the "user friendliness" of the program and university to students, hope to introduce an additional aspect to the delivery of their three e-journalism programs. The plan is to create a Learning Node for students in the Emerald district. The Learning Node will comprise students who reside either in the 4717 to 4726 postal code area or within commuting distance. The Learning Node will provide students with the usual delivery and support but will have the additional support, input and guidance a mentor, the editor of the local newspaper. This person will be involved in conversation with students and other participants in the project via electronic means and by face-to-face discussion and seminar sessions.

The project meshed with the CQU Strategic Plan and CQU Management Plan for Teaching and Learning in the following areas:

Goal 1: Good teaching and learning.

"To recognize, encourage, support and reward good teaching and to monitor and improve the quality of teaching and learning through the design and implementation of effective quality management and quality improvement processes and procedures. To encourage a scholarly approach to these activities through the active support and encouragement of research into teaching and learning."

Encourage good teaching practice and program development

Monitor and improve teaching practice and development

Application of systematic quality management to teaching and learning

Encourage scholarship and research into teaching and learning

Encourage, support and reward good teaching

Goal 2: Developing the teaching and learning environment.

"To develop an organization al climate which encourages and supports choice for students in how they learn through the provision of flexible learning opportunities, flexible delivery and other innovative approaches"

to teaching and learning which supports the development of quality teaching through the provision of appropriate staff development opportunities, physical infrastructure and technology-based systems.”

Improving the teaching-learning environment
Flexibility for learners and teachers
Productive flexible delivery infrastructure

Goal 3: Community relationships.

“To further develop the University’s partnerships and opportunities for the Central Queensland community including a focus on meeting the needs of Indigenous, isolated and disadvantaged students.”

Equity of provision-consistent, quality programs for a diverse student community
Seeking partnerships and opportunities in teaching and learning
Meeting needs of Indigenous and isolated learners and equity groups
Marketing and promotion of programs for the CQU community
(Nouwens, July 2003, CQU TLPlan Goals)

Action Research

The study will include a literature review followed by an Action Research (AR) project that will develop and test questions relating to how online delivery and industry mentored programs might be offered, organised and funded.

Students studying by flexi or distance delivery modes often experience isolation and as noted previously do not necessarily feel that they belong to a university environment. This project is seeking not only to minimise the negative aspects of distance and electronic delivery, but also develop a Self Organising Learner (SOL) based on the theory and process expounded by Thomas and Harri-Augstein (2001, p921) in their discussion of scientific methods for the study of human learning. They discuss and analyse how learning researchers (Tinbergen, 1953; Lorenz, 1974; Bateson, 1980; Mead, 1934; Dewey, 1957; Keynes, 1936; Lewin, 1932; Ashby, 1964; Pask, 1973; Brunner et al, 1968; and Kelly, 1969) all developed new methods of scientific enquiry. The writings and theories of these researchers have greatly influenced the pedagogy and study of learning. Thomas and Harri-Augstein go on to note that the outcome in application has not always had the desired consequences. As a result they propose a new approach; “conversation pedagogy which enables

learners to act as personal scientists,” construct their own unique meaning and become self-organising learners.

Thomas and Harri-Augstein’s theory forms the conceptual framework for the proposed research project.

Action Research

An Action Research (AR) methodology will be used to assess and evaluate the use and outcomes of the modified delivery system that includes a mentor to a group of students. Data will be analysed using a computer based program such as NUD*IST.

The AR participants will be the students – from all years and levels of the e-Journalism program, the mentor, lecturers, program designers and the researcher who will participate in conversation about the discipline and the learning and conversation process. Conversation science pedagogy involves “investigative conversation in its relevant domain, to enable human knowledge in that domain to grow systematically, by building on and continually expanding, replacing and renewing the relevant knowledge which has preceded it”(Thomas and Harri-Augstein, 2001, p923).

Action research involves learning in and through action and reflection. McNiff (2002) outlined the theory, and history of the development of action research as a research methodology since 1933 to the present. Kurt Lewin (1946, cited in McNiff, 2002, p41) “developed a theory of action research as a spiral of steps involving planning, fact-finding (or reconnaissance) and execution.” This cycle is now referred to as an “action-reflection cycle of planning, acting, observing and reflecting.”

Subsequent theorists have revised and expanded Lewin’s model. Action research methodology is used by researchers in social science disciplines where people, processes and programs are being studied. Gronhaug and Olsen (1999) reviewed the controversies surrounding action research and identified the challenges involved in doing high quality action research. They cite Rappoport’s (1970, p449) definition as the one most commonly used:

Action research claims to contribute both to the practical concerns of people in an immediate problematic situation and to the goals of social science by joint collaboration within a mutually acceptable ethical framework.

The core concepts of action research mean:

- Σ It is context bound and addresses real-life problems.
- Σ It is inquiry where participants and researchers co-generate knowledge through collaborative communication processes in which all participants' contributions are taken seriously.
- Σ It treats the diversity of experience and capacities within the local group as an opportunity for the enrichment of the research action process

In reporting the results of a project relating to the delivery and management of a distance learning program McPherson and Nunes (2002, p300) assert that the use of action research “enabled both tutors and students to be actively involved in course development and delivery, and resulted in a highly motivated staff and cohort of students”.

The AR process will involve the action-reflection cycle of acting, planning observing and reflecting .

Conclusion

Four major outcomes are anticipated from the findings of the Emerald Project.

1. The template produced will have immediate application to the delivery of CQU courses, both domestic and international, and could offer a new pathway for students.
2. Report and template for academic policy development for CQU
3. Initiate conference papers and journal articles
4. Further research would provide a platform for ARC and State funded grants for research examining less traditional teaching and learning models

The endpoints will generate findings that are applicable to other discipline related programs within CQU. Mapping the journey and providing a template of the process of developing Self-Organising Learners will provide teachers and designers with a system to design programs that treat the learner as a fully functioning and participative individual.

