

January 2013

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Recommended Citation

Paulin, Lisa (2013) "The Impact and Potential of Inter-university Collaboration in Journalism Experiential Education: A Case Study," *Teacher-Scholar: The Journal of the State Comprehensive University*. Vol. 5: Iss. 1, Article 4.

DOI: 10.58809/DRUL9609

Available at: <https://scholars.fhsu.edu/ts/vol5/iss1/4>

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The Impact and Potential of Inter-university Collaboration in Journalism Experiential Education: A Case Study

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Since 2009, journalism students from The University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill (UNC) and North Carolina Central University (NCCU) have been reporting and writing for a community newspaper, the *Voice*. This essay provides a case study of experiential learning and inter-university collaboration by focusing on students' perceptions of their work as reporters and my experience as a faculty adviser to the project. This study contributes to calls for research case studies in student experiential learning in journalism (Brandon, 2002; Feldman, 1995; Mensing, 2010). Additionally, it builds on concern for tracking journalism experiences targeting minority students. In this case, one set of students come from a small program at a public historically black university (NCCU) while the others come from a highly-regarded journalism school (UNC), which helps with understanding how a project like this might operate differently for small programs.

Background

Northeast Central Durham (NECD) lies east of downtown Durham, North Carolina. The 96-block area was considered crime ridden and poverty stricken (NECD was home to the largest proportion of the city's calls about gun shots fired, prostitution and drug-related arrests, known gang activity, and gun confiscations), when in 2002 city officials formed a committee of community stakeholders to improve the area as part of a City of Durham strategic plan. During the research phase in 2007, residents complained that the local paper focused only on NECD's crime and problems. The idea for a community newspaper stemmed from an interdisciplinary faculty program held in 2008 that charged participants with creating projects to engage with at-risk communities.

In summer 2008, Jock Lauterer, journalism professor at UNC, invited me to discuss launching a newspaper which we called the *Voice*, and in fall 2009 the online *Voice* was born (<http://www.durhamvoice.org>). By spring 2010, we distributed the first print edition, with a 2000 print run, throughout NECD and Durham. Students in Community Journalism at UNC and Advanced Reporting at NCCU serve as reporters and write five stories with photographs per semester. Students are instructed that the goal is to give a voice to a community that has not had an outlet for its stories, but that they do not have to write positive stories. We emphasize that we are not doing public relations, although the paper tends to have a positive bent. This unique program

provides a case study of experiential learning in journalism education and inter-university collaboration as well as a response to concerns for tracking journalism experiences targeting minority students.

The classes in this program operate under a model of experiential learning defined as “a process during which a person experiences an event, acquires competencies, and then compares knowledge gained with knowledge gained in similar situations” (Brandon, 2002, p. 62). Scholars have proposed various models of experiential learning. Kurt Lewin’s (1951) model of the experiential learning cycle begins with concrete experience followed by observation and reflection. Abstract concepts and generalization are drawn from the reflections, which allow for new actions and experiences. At the beginning of the semester, we take a tour of the neighborhood. The first news stories are due the following week allowing students to observe one another’s work and reflect and modify their next concrete experience, thus following the model.

The class I teach includes conversations and activities about community journalism and NECD and reinforcement of traditional journalism skills. Students go into the neighborhood to find story ideas, conduct background research, interview sources, take photographs, and write news stories, allowing them to acquire greater competency in recognized journalism skills. They are able to compare what they have experienced and learned with what they learned in prior journalism classes.

The syllabus includes class time for students to reflect on their experiences, and the final project is a reflective portfolio. I also allow time for in-class guided newsroom work; students work on their stories consulting with me or other classmates as they are working. We peer review and edit stories before the deadline and hold a reflective discussion on the experience after each deadline before brainstorming for the next story. The deadlines come every two weeks. I have never been able to attend the class at UNC, but Lauterer always gives me his syllabus. Because he is known in the state as a community journalism expert, he shares his experiences and invites guest speakers to talk about specific experiences and qualities that a reporter should possess when working in smaller communities. He focuses on how newsgathering is different when you are working in smaller communities or for a community newspaper.

For the print edition of the *Voice*, designated student editors from the UNC course, along with Lauterer, select stories from the online edition. The print edition is a 16-page tabloid and averages 17 stories per issue. Each issue is a mix of content provided by our students and local teens, and content pulled from local high school newspapers. Frequently the teens provide more editorial commentary while the university students write feature stories. To provide an example, a randomly selected issue of the *Voice* from 2011 includes an editorial from a teen, a reflective editorial written by the teen mentoring coordinator, one article in Spanish written by a NCCU student, four other articles by NCCU students, five articles by UNC students, three articles from

a high school newspaper, and one written by a teen intern with the *Voice*. Many stories cover events tied to local nonprofit organizations, often focusing on initiatives aimed at children or adolescents. The professors do not assign topics or beats, but we provide students with story ideas.

Despite the practical collaboration described here, I refer to this as a limited collaboration because while the *Voice* could still exist without NCCU, it would not exist without UNC. NCCU has about a third of the undergraduate enrollment of UNC and in 2011 had 44 journalism graduates while UNC had 393. Perhaps more noteworthy is that the percentage of Pell grant recipients at NCCU is three times higher than that of UNC, and, in 2011, 79% of NCCU students had federal student loans while only 26% of UNC students did. NCCU students frequently have full-time jobs while also being full-time students. On average my *Voice* classes have had about six to eight students per semester, and each semester at least two students have been single parents. These extra responsibilities often mean that coursework is an additional responsibility, but not necessarily the students' top priority. I have also taught at UNC. UNC is a prestigious public university with highly competitive admissions. The six-year graduation rate at UNC is 88%; at NCCU, it is 38%.

I teach four classes per semester while Lauterer teaches two. Additionally, Lauterer often has a graduate teaching assistant, which I do not enjoy. UNC's School of Journalism and Mass Communication has other resources that we do not have in the College of Arts and Sciences at NCCU such as a grant writing office, and an IT office. The extra time and resources enable him to manage and strategically plan the future of the *Voice*. This is also a limited collaboration because my students contribute stories, but the entire venture is organized and run at UNC. Although we have discussed appointing a NCCU student to the print layout/editing team, we have not found a single semester in which a NCCU student had the interest, ability, transportation, and class schedule that would permit him/her to drive 30 minutes to UNC during the time frame when UNC students lay out and edit the paper. Besides meeting at the beginning of the semester for the tour, the students from the two universities never meet or work together, so they do not truly collaborate. We have attempted to pair students up to share reflections and ideas, and suggested they organize some kind of mid-semester social activity, but the students have never followed through on those ideas.

After five semesters of being the instructor at NCCU for this project, I have found the experience only somewhat rewarding. My students have trouble meeting deadlines, and I feel their stories often lack depth. They complain about sources not calling them back, not having time, and my expectations being too high. I am frustrated when my students have not provided adequate background context for a story, especially when that was the specific feedback I gave them in the draft stage. I worry that they have not uncovered the full story or interviewed the correct sources. Additionally, I have to spend a full day editing my students' stories; fixing simple writing errors that journalism students should not be making. To deal with these frustrations, I focus on the

students who are exceeding my expectations and take pride in their work. Although it disappoints me, I have to accept and recognize that some students do not care about the project. I use a variety of techniques to stimulate their interest, but sometimes I have to step back and tell myself that I cannot make them care about the *Voice*, the community, or even about doing their best. For the weakest students, I try to focus on moving them beyond where they were when they started the semester. When I taught at UNC, students would line up outside my office to discuss their grade if they got a C on an assignment. This rarely happens at NCCU. Students have earned Ds and Fs on assignments and for the course and several have repeated the class. To date, only one student has complained about her grade being unfair. I am fairly confident that UNC students rarely earn a C whereas mine rarely earn an A. I have concerns about marginalization and privilege. While the scope of this paper does not allow for a full exploration, these include the intersections of various levels of privilege. One occurs at the college student/community level, another with the differences between socioeconomic level and race of UNC and NCCU students, and another between the resources available at UNC and NCCU. As much as I wish we could be equal partners, it is not going to happen.

Literature Review

Experiential learning is frequently traced to John Dewey's 1938 *Experience and Education*, but scholars are increasingly applying it to journalism education. Barbara Feldman's 1995 study was the first to explicitly examine experiential education with race. She was concerned with the dismal statistic that 90 percent of print journalists at the time were white and male. She used data from the 1989 American Society of Newspaper Editors survey to answer questions about how early journalism experiences (defined as internships and working on school newspapers) influenced career choice and employment. She found that "exposure to the field of journalism while one is in school significantly increases the chances that the individual will work as a print journalist" (p. 26). Feldman then looked at minority retention and graduation in journalism programs, as well as the fewer number of journalism programs offered at HBCUs. Feldman concluded by calling for qualitative research into what journalism departments are doing regarding minority education and "determining and describing the environmental conditions and sociocultural context wherein minority education and experiential learning takes place" (Feldman, 1995, p. 27).

While much of the research on community journalism has focused on community ties and ethical dilemmas, John Hatcher's (2009) study begins to answer the call for research case studies in student experiential learning. His research focused on student perceptions of a community-focused reporting project through an analysis of written reflections at the beginning and end of the semester. In this case, the students were also reporting on a disenfranchised neighborhood. For the most part, Hatcher found that students' initial perceptions included concern about personal safety as well

as journalistic principle. The students had a hard time imagining how they would find story ideas without relying on official sources. At the end, students expressed surprise at how they had been able to find “people who shared common concerns, hopes, and aspirations about life” (Hatcher, 2009, p. 311). Hatcher’s conclusion echoes the findings of studies on experiential learning and community-based journalism education: “It’s encouraging to consider that community-focused reporting may allow the academy to experiment with innovative approaches to journalism, rather than indoctrinating students into the traditions and routines of an industry that is faced with an urgent need to evolve” (p. 316).

The current study contributes to calls for research on experiential learning in journalism using an approach similar to Hatcher (2009) by examining former students’ perceptions. Because of the partnership between universities, it also contributes to scholarship on the potential and caveats for small programs working in collaboration to provide experiential learning opportunities in journalism. As it involves students from an HBCU, the study also takes into account Feldman’s concern regarding ways to increase minority opportunities in journalism.

The Study

Sample and Procedure. This study uses qualitative methods appropriate for a descriptive case study (Creswell, 2003; Priest, 2010). Because it contributes to building a body of knowledge by exploring actual practices (Priest, 2010), we used individual semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions designed to elicit views and opinions from the participants (Creswell, 2003, 188).

In spring 2011, ten students from NCCU and eight from UNC participated in interviews. We contacted all of the former students we could locate through internet and social media searches. We were able to find 22 out of 32 former students and invited all to participate. Interviewees received a \$20 Visa gift card as incentive for their participation. Small sample sizes are considered appropriate to most qualitative research, particularly case studies (Priest, 2010). All NCCU students were African American and only one UNC student was a minority group member (Indian descent). Participants ranged from being *Voice* reporters the previous semester to being reporters from the first semester of the project. We did not differentiate responses based on how long ago reporters had worked with the project.

Apart from one phone interview, the interviews were conducted face-to-face in conference rooms at students’ respective universities or at neutral locations in the community. Undergraduate students from NCCU conducted the interviews after training in interview methodology. None of them had worked for the *Voice*. One was an African American male, one an African American female, and the other a white female. I am a white female, and I was not present for the interviews but participants knew that I would have access to the data and that they might be identifiable. They were audiotaped and transcribed. None of the participants was a current or recent student of mine at the time of the

interviews; they knew that I would not be their instructor for any future classes. The original goal of the interviews was to gather as much data as possible about students' experiences, so we asked questions ranging from first impressions, challenging and rewarding aspects, and perceptions of the community. The interviews lasted from 20 minutes to one hour. UNC students elaborated more on their experiences, so the longest interviews were consistently the ones with UNC students. The project was approved by the IRB of NCCU.

Data Analysis. The audio-taped interviews were transcribed by a contracted service. The researcher analyzed the documents using the qualitative analysis software, Atlas.ti, which allows researchers to assign codes to chunks of text. For example, we assigned the code *challenge* to text whenever participants were talking about something that was difficult for them, not just within the question about challenges, but whenever it is mentioned in the conversation. After assigning codes, we merged the comments into networks and looked for patterns and themes that emerged. We looked at NCCU and UNC student responses separately to be able to compare them.

Students' Experiences. Overall, students reflected on the *Voice* project positively, but found the project rewarding in different ways. Even though all reported the most challenging aspect to be the logistics of the work, they differed when they talked about dealing with non-cooperative sources. They also differed in the way they reported feeling at the outset of the project. UNC students expressed a mixture of fear and excitement at the beginning whereas NCCU students used the word "challenge" in various ways. UNC students reported unfamiliarity with Durham and perceptions of it being dangerous. They often attributed the fear to a third party. Some of their comments included, "my mother would kill me if she knew what I was about to do" and "you hear a lot about how dangerous it is, but I really didn't see any of that", and "some students were scared."

Nonetheless, most of the students used the word "excited" when talking about their first impressions. Their excitement mainly stemmed from the opportunities to gain professional-like experience. One elaborated on this:

I was really excited because it's nice to have, especially in the journalism school, experience that feels like people are reading your stories because I think that's something that's been hard for me when I've had other classes here is that you're doing a lot of reporting, a lot of interviewing, a lot of great work but then only a professor reads your stories...that was the first component that really drew me to the *Voice* actually having an audience that was a community that was interested in the kind of work that I was doing.

Others simply said, "I was really looking forward to it," "I thought it was a great idea," and several said, "I was really excited about it."

In contrast, NCCU students expressed reservations and concerns about where they would find story ideas and when they were going to find time to do this. One student said:

Well, my first thoughts on it was that it was going to be a bit of a challenge, very time consuming because I was unfamiliar with the

area and didn't have a lot of connections in Durham because I'm an out of state student.

Overall, they did not express pessimism, just more reservations.

Comments reflecting this include:

I was like, 'Where am I going to find time to squeeze these in on time on top of what I've already got?' But once I got into it and started doing it and hitting the streets and walking around, it was kind of enjoyable meeting like the preachers and the business owners and the ordinary citizens.

These findings confirm my own impressions. Despite my best efforts to begin the semester expressing enthusiasm about the project, NCCU students approach the project with more reservations than UNC students.

The logistical difficulties students from both universities faced included meeting deadlines; navigating in Durham; finding time to do the work while balancing other classes, part-time jobs, and working for the university newspaper. When these likely typical difficulties were coupled with what students perceived as non-cooperative sources these created more complex difficulties. Students from both universities had trouble finding people who were willing to talk and mainly attributed this to people not trusting them and with the *Voice* not being known in the community. UNC students linked this to race and socioeconomic differences more explicitly than NCCU students. One UNC student said, "I think it was especially hard, too, that you are looking at a community that is so different, racially, socioeconomically, and culturally, than what most of us here come from."

This is one aspect in which student race seems to have made the experience different for the students. NCCU students' comments reflected more insider knowledge about uncooperative sources because of their race or because community members, although uncooperative, afforded them insider status. When community members did not want to be interviewed or quoted and the reporter was African American, they told them *why*. One UNC (white male) reporter expressed perplexity about uncooperative sources:

I'd interview them, and then they'd say, 'Oh, but you can't use my quotes, or anything I said' or 'you can't take my picture' and all this. 'I don't want to be in the paper.' I'm like, 'why would you not want to be in the paper?' And that's just especially ironic, cause it's the *Voice*, like it's supposed to be empowering people and their voices.

On the other hand, one NCCU student said, "NECD is a predominantly African American community and as people know, a lot of times African Americans don't really like to talk about—or put themselves out there in the media like that." Another said:

It's the hood. Not trying to be funny but people with hood mentalities, they don't want to talk. That's just how it is. Just like I was writing a story and a guy told me, 'no, don't take my picture,' while somebody was cutting his hair. He was like, 'no, don't take my picture. I've got warrants out. Don't put my name in the story.' Another guy was like, 'I

owe too much child support. I don't want my face in the paper either.' I had to wait two guys to get a full haircut before someone told me, 'Okay, yeah you can take my picture. I'll give you an interview.'

This insider knowledge is part of the reason Lauterer invited NCCU to participate in the project. He was concerned that the socioeconomic and racial profile of UNC students would make it difficult, if not impossible, to gain access to people in the community and find sources willing to talk with them. Although the students work independently, NCCU is respected in the community and it likely helps UNC students to be able to tell potential sources that the newspaper is a collaboration between the two universities. Despite the apparent advantage race may give NCCU students, I would also argue that it presents an additional burden. When sources share why they do not want to be quoted or photographed, students may begin to feel like nosy reporters and become even more reluctant to reach out to unofficial sources.

Although the literature on experiential learning in journalism mentions working for the campus newspaper, several NCCU students discussed the *Voice* as being more challenging. One said, "if you go in with a mindset, it's going to be the same quick stories to do that you can knock out in a couple days, it wasn't like that with the *Voice*." Another said:

Campus stories are pretty easy compared to the community journalism stories. You actually had to go a little bit more in depth. The person writing for a school newspaper can write up a campus story in five minutes but working on the *Voice* it actually challenged you to go deeper.

Rewarding in Different Ways. Throughout the interviews, students elaborated on the impact the *Voice* had on them and how they had benefitted from the experience. Interestingly, UNC and NCCU students' comments differed markedly. UNC students' answers reflected the principles of community journalism even when they were talking about reporting skills they acquired or improved. They described the *Voice* experience as feeling more meaningful, as "doing something useful" and how being accountable to people made it different. One said that "it's good to think of people as people, instead of sources." Another said, "we also had to think about who was going to be reading this. It's a lot different from the regular reporting classes where you just write stories and nobody really reads them—only the professor." Overall, they seemed to have been made aware of the responsibility of journalism. Their responses reflected more philosophical journalistic principles or abilities rather than hard skills. One UNC student said, "heightened sensitivity as a reporter was something I definitely gained." NCCU students gave shorter answers when they talked about how the *Voice* benefitted them. They focused on tangible journalism skills such as taking photographs, writing, and interviewing. One said simply, "It just taught me how to tell a better story."

This is where the difference between large and small program may be most apparent. At UNC, all students take the core course News Writing and if the students are in the reporting concentration, they take Reporting.

UNC students reported that the News Writing class was structured to help them master inverted pyramid style with the professor giving them facts and quotes to turn into a story due at the end of class. They said that they did more information gathering in the Reporting class, where they were assigned beats, but many said that they used meeting minutes and written statements from official sources, and had not developed depth interviewing skills that they needed for the stories for the *Voice*. They mentioned that other elective courses such as Feature Writing or Business Reporting would have given them more experience, but none of them had taken those classes. In general, the *Voice* course had a huge impact on UNC students, who felt as though they were connecting with people, paying attention to ethical dilemmas journalists face, and doing something for which they could be held accountable. It is important to note that *The Daily Tar Heel*, the campus newspaper at UNC, is located off campus, not in the journalism school, and has its own staff that does not work in the school. Not all journalism majors work for the paper.

In contrast, at NCCU, the students take one course, Introduction to Reporting & Writing for the News Media. This course focuses on newspapers and the goal is for students to turn in news stories that are suitable for publication in the campus newspaper. Because of the smaller size of the university, the campus newspaper editor usually needs these contributions for each issue. The newsroom is connected to the classroom where Reporting & Writing is taught. Until recently, the mass communication major was part of the Department of English and Mass Communication, and the students have been required to take three additional English classes beyond English Composition. This likely played a role in why the improvement they expressed was more generalized. They practiced and built on basic journalism skills that they had learned in only one prior class.

The students from both universities valued the experience of seeing their work published. One NCCU student said:

Seeing my story in print and the first issue came out, I had two stories in it with my photos that I took. I was just totally pumped like that and that for me was exciting and it made me want to get all that wrote in the paper so I could say, "hey, I actually did something and I can show it in print."

One UNC student said:

[I]t's nice to have, especially in the journalism school, to have experience that feels like people are reading your stories because I think that's something that's been hard for me when I've had other classes here is that you're doing a lot of reporting, a lot of interviewing, a lot of great work but then only a professor really reads your stories.

NCCU students generally did not enter the class with the same "number of hours logged" in news writing or reporting, but because of the structure of the program, they are used to the idea that they are not just writing something for the instructor's eyes. This finding surprised me. I had assumed that because of UNC's prestige, most of the students had seen their work published. Most

NCCU students have at least been published in the campus newspaper. This may also contribute to the initial enthusiasm UNC students reflected toward the project.

The students from both universities also said that the best thing was how the experience benefitted the community. One UNC student commented on the experience of “riding with the professor when he was delivering the *Voice* and going to some small businesses and seeing how glad they were to see him with a bundle of newspapers.” Another UNC student remarked about “caring that you get the story right for them, that you’re really serving an audience.” Similarly, a NCCU student expressed excitement at:

...seeing people’s faces when you show them “Here’s this print edition of the story that’s about you” or your church, or your home, or your office place. It’s seeing them getting happy saying this is about me, and that enjoyment that they may not have gotten from another paper.

From these responses, it is safe to say that students found the experience rewarding both personally and in recognizing the power of community journalism.

Conclusion

Small programs can effectively collaborate with large prestigious programs to bring experiential learning to journalism students. Recognizing the limitations of the collaboration can help it succeed. Our project works because both faculty members are constantly working at keeping it going and are flexible in the format of the collaboration. I am committed to the project because I know my students are benefitting from the experience – an experience that I alone could not give them. Additionally, this study helps answer the call for more research in experiential learning in journalism education and based on the findings, experiential learning provides important additional value to what students learn in the classroom. Students from both small and large programs can benefit from it in acquisition of concrete skills, principles of journalism, agility in navigating story topics and sources, and in building their own portfolios. They connected with readers and felt more accountable. Although Brandon (2002) and Mensing (2010) propose that research be conducted on experiences in internships and working with the university newspaper, this research shows that the students found the experience more challenging than working for the campus newspaper.

Although this study did not explicitly look at the impact of student race and racial makeup of the community, we did find that it may intersect in ways that deserve some exploration. African American student reporters did not express the initial degree of fear or concern about the safety of the neighborhood that the non-African American students did. But, African American students may have been treated differently by some sources than the white reporters.

Examining the structure of other community journalism educational initiatives would be insightful. This project works largely because the large university has resources that the smaller program does not have, such as in-

house grant writers, lower faculty teaching loads, more foundation money. It would be interesting to see if there are other small programs doing this type of experiential learning in journalism and how they organize the work. This study supports the assertions that experiential learning in community journalism is highly valuable. The experience gave practical experience and meaning to the journalism education of the students. At the same time, they became better journalists and better citizens: more empathetic, concerned about accountability, willing to include non-traditional voices in their reporting. Since community journalism continues to thrive while metropolitan papers struggle, it is likely that graduating students will find their first jobs in community newspapers. Journalism programs should continue to find ways to provide them with opportunities to acquire the skills and principles they will need to be successful.

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