

Designing Journalism Capstone Units That Demonstrate Student Skills

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Abstract

There are considerable differences in the structure, content, and delivery of tertiary journalism degrees in Australia as identified in a 2014 Office for Learning and Teaching (OLT) Innovation and Development Project report on graduate qualities and journalism curriculum renewal. To address this situation, the author argues for journalism capstone units, designed by both journalism educators and news editors, to include a series of agreed criteria and standards to guide journalism educators, and for journalism students to demonstrate not only a broad knowledge base together with research and communication skills but also entrepreneurial skills to help them adapt to new media markets and jobs.

Keywords

journalism education, capstone units, graduate capabilities, employability, curriculum development

What Are Capstone Units?

Internationally, the term “capstone” has most commonly been used in the United States, where a capstone often takes the form of a “senior seminar.” As a graduation requirement, this may comprise a service or workplace experience and project, a significant paper, or a series of culminating activities in a major or an interdisciplinary area. In the simplest terms, capstones are substantial culminating learning experiences that take place in the final stage of an educational course, offering closure and a focus for the sense of achievement that comes with completion. From a quality assurance

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point of view, capstones can also provide a means of demonstrating course-level learning outcomes (Krause et al., 2014; Rasul et al., 2009).

The terminology is relatively new in Australia, and appears to have come into common usage gradually over the past decade or so although there is clear evidence of capstone-like activities occurring for a much longer period. It is certainly the case that a significant integrative project in final year has long been a common feature of undergraduate courses in many disciplines in Australia and elsewhere, particularly engineering, information communications technology and design (Rasul et al., 2009). A cursory glance at the course offerings of Australian higher education institutions suggests there is increasing adoption of capstones in a variety of formats. A recent Australian audit of business courses found a similar prevalence of capstones, at 82% (Bailey, Acker, & Fyffe, 2013).

Capstones have been described as a possible source of evidence for many of these processes. Indeed, Krause et al. (2014) observe that “capstones are being increasingly used as a device to put whole-of-course learning together to assess whether graduates are work ready in their chosen disciplines” (p. 74). But as Kift et al. (2013) argue, “it is unlikely that a single capstone subject will be able to bear the burden of assuring the entirety of a particular course’s learning outcomes” (p. 63).

Regardless of these challenges, and given the potential benefits to students and their capacity to provide a focus for evaluation, there are indications that capstones will play a key role in establishing and assessing course-level learning outcomes in Australia. Reflecting findings elsewhere (Hauhart & Grahe, 2015), the most common capstone curriculum models are project or problem-based (89%).

Background to Journalism Programs in Australia

A close look at tertiary journalism programs in Australia reveals a wide degree of discrepancy in content and the measurement of graduate capabilities. The author discovered this when undertaking an audit of all undergraduate journalism degrees and majors in Australian universities which was part of an Office for Learning and Teaching (OLT) 2014 Innovation and Development Grant report into graduate qualities and journalism curriculum renewal. The study revealed not only a wide diversity of units on offer (17 in all) but also differences in content, emphasis, and delivery. Some courses were more focused on theory-based units while others opted for mainly practical skills building units (Cullen, 2014). Currently, it is difficult for news editors to measure a skill set from a graduate’s journalism degree or major, and for graduates to demonstrate evidence they have acquired skills and competencies for employment.

Yet, in a tertiary journalism curriculum, there should be a way to identify the minimum standards and test capabilities to be met by a graduate from a bachelor-level degree or who is enrolled in a major in the field of journalism. This was partially attempted in 2011 with a Special Initiative OLT Grant titled *Discipline Network: Journalism, Media and Communication*. One aim was to develop systemic discipline standards for undergraduate and postgraduate courses in Australia, which

encompassed journalism, public relations, media and communication studies, and thereby provide some form of benchmarking across the universities in Australia. While this was an important aim, the outcome was difficult to achieve because of the immense variety of views from educators across the three disciplines, and there were no disciplinary guidelines by which to measure standards. Besides, Teaching Learning Outcomes (TLOs) provide a guide but do not define the content, teaching, and learning approaches used to achieve outcomes. This lack of specificity is supported by the findings of another OLT project on graduate outcomes: “While many such lists are now available as external reference points for developing statements of outcomes, regardless of the ‘outcomes’ included on the list, evidence of the standard of their achievement requires assessment of student (or graduate) abilities” (Barrie, Hughes, Crisp, & Bennison, 2014, p.68).

An article in *Higher Education Research and Development* argues, “there is a clear need for the capstone experience to be tailored suitably to student (and workplace) needs” (Thomas, Wonga, & Li, 2014, p 582.). However, Kift et al. (2013) argue that “it is unlikely that a single capstone subject will be able to bear the burden of assuring the entirety of a particular course’s learning outcomes” (p. 63). However, there is agreement that, if effectively designed, capstone units can improve students’ learning and experience and enhance graduate employability.

This research project builds on these important contributions, but has a more focused, practical, and achievable aim—to try to deliver a series of agreed principles and standards to guide journalism educators in the design or redesign of final-year journalism capstone units that measure graduate capabilities more effectively.

Evidence to support the design and inclusion of journalism capstone units is also evident from the 2014 OLT Innovation and Development Grant report that included interviews with 50 tertiary journalism educators and 50 news editors across Australia. There was broad agreement among the educators that journalism education should aim to achieve three key outcomes—build a broad knowledge base, develop research and analytical skills, and teach core media and communication skills. However, in terms of the last outcome, there was a common view that professional industry placements (PIPs) were problematic for testing graduate capabilities as not only were they decreasing in number, but students enrolled in PIPs did not necessarily have the required skills and often ended up performing menial tasks in the newsroom.

Interviews with the 50 news editors revealed most of them perceived graduate students enrolled in PIPs as being generally competent with digital media, but often lacking in basic general knowledge, and essential newswriting and grammar skills (Tanner, Green, Cullen, & O’Donnell, 2014). In fact, PIPs often exposed a graduate’s lack of ability rather than improved it. Besides, editors and journalists are often far too busy to instruct, monitor, or assess their work practice skills. Industry placements are useful, but they do not provide an adequate measurement of graduate capabilities. Billett (2011), in his investigation into *Curriculum and pedagogic bases for effectively integrating practice-based experiences*, stresses the need to be clear about what needs to be learnt and to consider options other than supervised placements to secure intended educational purposes (Billett, 2011).

In short, I think there are four main reasons for the design and development of journalism capstone units:

- Journalism and the media industry have undergone major structural changes due to the introduction of new digital technologies. This rapid, fast-paced change is notable in many industries but is acute in the media sector and therefore demands a particularly responsive and adaptable curriculum for journalism education.
- The interviewees—both industry and academic in the 2014 OLT project report on graduate capabilities—agreed there was a key role for universities to provide an educational background and skills-based training for people contemplating a career in journalism and early career journalists.
- The study found there was a wide range of offerings available, with considerable differences in structure even between dedicated Bachelor of Journalism degrees, or similarly named programs. Currently, there are several final-year journalism capstone units in use in Australian universities but they differ widely in the way they measure and assess graduate capabilities.
- Industry does not appear to have much insight into the structure of the programs on offer, even within their home states. This is one reason why accreditation of journalism programs in Australia is problematic. Yet, there was agreement industry and universities need to work more closely, with a belief industry could have broader input into program design and curriculum revitalization.

These four points are based on data from recorded interviews with 50 journalism educators and 50 news editors from around Australia, and they expose real concerns about the need to test and improve graduate learning outcomes and capabilities. Before the interviews, the 2014 Journalism Education and Research Association of Australia (JERAA) conference in Melbourne had debated how to achieve improved learning outcomes in journalism programs in Australia against agreed upon national standards, especially the requirement to map and evidence the relationships between generic attributes and disciplinary capabilities. This debate has faded due to an overemphasis on theoretical frameworks, a lack of agreement on definitions, and the sense there are limited practical outcomes. The topic was barely discussed at the 2015 JERAA conference in Sydney.

Journalism Capstone Units in Australia

A recent development in journalism education has been the use of undergraduate journalism capstone units at 10 universities in Australia. Universities increasingly offer capstone subjects as part of curricula to prepare final-year undergraduates for employment and bridge the gap between academic learning and professional work. However, the current journalism capstone units all vary in content, delivery, and learning outcomes. Some opt for research projects while others offer professional placements or a selection from a list of core units. Hence, it is difficult to define exactly what a journalism capstone unit is from what is currently on offer.

For example, at Swinburne University of Technology, the final-year journalism capstone unit is divided into two sections: Capstone A and Capstone B. The description of learning outcomes for Capstone A, which involves a journalism project and reflective essay, state the students will gain experience, complete a journalism project, and reflect on ethical and legal issues connected with the practice of journalism. The description of learning outcomes for Capstone B is similar, and the learning outcomes include the ability to identify audiences, gain experience in building audiences, become part of an Internet-based platform, and be able to reflect on journalism practice and the ethical, legal, and practical problems encountered. There is an absence of phrases like “measure” or “demonstrate” capabilities. “Should” is preferred to “can.” It is a similar story at Monash University. The final-year journalism unit is in fact a PIP unit where entry depends on negotiation with the unit coordinator. Learning outcomes are expressed with phrases like—“students should be able to.” The journalism capstone unit at the University of Canberra is basically a PIP but it is the only university to state in the learning outcomes that students “will be able to demonstrate ability.” This offers concrete learning outcomes while the more optimistic modal verb “should” creates an impression it is more aspirational than actual.

While these journalism capstones vary in their preference for either a research project or PIPs, there is still the basic issue of how to measure graduate capabilities. As stated before, a PIP is problematic as there is the presumption graduates have actually acquired a certain level of capability. They could form part of a journalism capstone unit but only as one of a number of other measurement activities. An initial list of core skills a journalism capstone unit needs to measure (judging from existing journalism capstones) includes research, writing, grammar, digital and social media, video, communication, and team skills. Yet, there is an inconsistency regarding the inclusion, importance, and assessment of these skills.

The structure and content of the journalism capstone units (that will be offered to all journalism program directors in Australia) will draw on the structure and content of existing capstones and also the findings from the 2013 OLT Fellowships on *Capstone curriculum across disciplines* (Lee, 2015).

Finally, St Clair (2015) points to a current challenge—the ever-changing world of journalism that requires journalism students to acquire and demonstrate new capabilities such as enterprising and entrepreneurial skills.

The world of journalism in the digital age is changing faster than university curricula can keep up. News is now produced in forms and on platforms that were non-existent 10 years ago. Journalists may increasingly generate their own work opportunities in entrepreneurial news outlets and start-ups, rather than as employees in legacy newsprint and broadcast media. Substantial workforce contraction has also occurred since 2012 as revenue in print and other traditional media has found new homes in social media and search engines, and over 1000 journalists (or 15 percent of the journalism workforce) were made redundant. Journalism graduates therefore need to be flexible, innovative and enterprising to survive professionally in this evolving setting. (St Clair, 2015, p. 122)

Method

Currently, 30 universities in Australia teach journalism and one third of them (10 universities) use at least one journalism capstone unit in their undergraduate programs. Therefore, the author decided to interview journalism educators at the 10 universities that already use journalism capstone units to discover what they understood by the term “capstone,” the type of capstone they use, and what skills the students had to demonstrate. One aim was to identify common principles and standards and to assist the other 20 tertiary journalism programs in Australia that want to introduce journalism capstones into their course even though some had units that could be easily identified as capstone units.

Face-to-face semistructured interviews were conducted in the offices of journalism educators in 10 universities around Australia that teach journalism capstone units. The universities were selected because they offer journalism capstone units (often in diverse formats). The four interview questions were open-ended to allow each participant to describe, as fully or as briefly, the particular reasons for his or her decisions. Every participant signed an information and consent form before each interview that lasted at least 1 hr. All 10 interviews were recorded and later transcribed. The universities included Monash, Melbourne, RMIT, Swinburne, Newcastle, Canberra, Sydney, University of Technology, Sydney, University of South Australia, and Wollongong. Several follow-up telephone calls were made to obtain both clarifications and further information. The interviews were conducted between September and December 2015 as Phase 1 of a three-phase research project. The remaining two phases, to be conducted from February to December 2016, include creating and trialing new capstone units and then the dissemination of these new units (by mid-2017) to the 30 universities that teach journalism. The interview included the following four questions:

- What do you understand by the term “capstone unit?”
- What type of capstone units do you use?
- What were the underlying principles for the capstone units?
- What disciplinary and professional skills do students need to demonstrate?

The author also organized a one day workshop (in February 2016) on journalism capstone units with journalism educators at four universities in Perth, Western Australia. These included Edith Cowan, Murdoch, Curtin, and Notre Dame universities. The participants were asked the same four questions as above but the session was conducted as an open forum rather than questions directed at individual institutions. None of these universities used the term “capstone” in their journalism courses.

Initial Findings From the Interviews

Question 1. What Do You Understand by the Term “Capstone Unit”?

Generally, the educators agreed that a prime aim of the capstone unit was to improve the employability of the student. This was often achieved through the use

of a portfolio that showed various skills that ranged from written, audio, visual, photographic, online, and social media skills. Another widely supported view was that a capstone unit should be a third-year unit, and it should enable students to demonstrate the skills they had acquired over a 3-year journalism degree course. Common phrases used to describe a capstone unit included “bringing together of skills and knowledge acquired over a 3-year period,” “a full stop on their course,” “a throw back to the future,” “rounding off their degree,” and “making sure they are job ready.”

These descriptions and understandings resonate with the views of several prominent researchers in the field of capstone research. McNamara et al. (2012) highlight the aspect of looking back and also forward:

An opportunity for final year students to both look back on their undergraduate study in an effort to make sense of what they have accomplished, and to look forward to a professional existence where they can build on that foundation. It is during the capstone experience that students complete the transition from their primarily student identity to embrace the beginning of their professional identity. (p. 3)

Lee’s (2015) research on capstone curriculum emphasizes the aspects of transition and independence:

Capstones are the culminating experiences for a course or program, and they serve a long list of functions. They provide students with the context in which they will integrate and apply prior learning, provide depth and complexity, engender independence and confidence, orient and transition to post graduate life. They are special, significant, challenging and exciting. Increasingly, they are also conceptualised as the key location for identifying whether students can demonstrate the achievement of many, if not all, program learning outcomes. (p. 6)

Question 2. What Type of Capstone Units Do You Use?

In Australia, as part of the recent focus on quality assurance of undergraduate qualifications, the use of capstone units has increasingly taken a central role in thinking about evidence of program quality. As a result, many Australian universities have introduced capstones with the twin aims of providing students with an enhanced undergraduate experience and a locus for quality assessment. Capstones come in many different forms, with a wide range of lengths, weightings, and activities. Lee (2015) identifies six common capstone models used across disciplines:

- Externally oriented projects
- Academic inquiry projects
- Practice-oriented simulations
- Practice-based consultancies
- Task-oriented simulation
- Professional placements

This research aims to deepen our understanding of the range of journalism capstone units in use in Australia and to develop resources that will support journalism educators in the design of new capstones or update existing ones. Findings from interviews with journalism educators at 10 universities revealed that there were three types of third-year capstone units in use: a newsroom simulation unit, a project, and an internship. The educators used at least one and often two (and sometimes three) types of capstone units. The internship was the most popular, followed by newsroom simulation and then a project.

First, the internship usually consisted of a 4-week full-time internship at a media organization. This involved consultation with the journalism coordinator about the suitability of the placement. It was a common practice to select high performing students rather than those who were average or struggling with the course. However, several educators argued against using the newsroom internship as the only capstone unit as there was often little supervision and mentoring in the newsroom. Also, adequate staffing and frequent discussions with students before, during, and after the internship usually provided the most productive outcomes and experience.

The newsroom simulation unit was a popular capstone unit used by the educators as it helped students to demonstrate what they had learnt during their 3-year undergraduate course. Part of this included a portfolio of published work and achievements. The third type of journalism capstone involved a project where the students covered a weeklong event or a local social or political issue. Students were exposed to a wide range of journalistic skills from interviewing, writing, editing, and keeping production deadlines. Critical reflection was considered a key part of the project.

Generally, the educators were satisfied that the benefits of a capstone unit far outweighed the negatives. For example, several of them said the capstone units enabled students to produce portfolios of their work or showreels. This is now a basic requirement when students apply for jobs at media organizations. Others spoke of how their students, especially in the placement and simulation capstone units (where students adopt newsroom roles and duties), had started to think and act like journalists and how they developed a confident and professional approach to their work. They could also identify gaps in their learning.

On the negative side, there was divided opinion about whether to rely solely on one capstone unit, and the university timetable often lacked the flexibility to cater for an intensive vocational course. Only RMIT was able to structure its newsroom simulation unit into a whole day, once a week. Weak students struggled with internships as industry was keen on employing highly motivated, intelligent, and determined students.

Question 3. What Were the Underlying Principles for the Capstone Units?

Principles provide a guide to the nature and unique importance of the capstone experience in the student journey to graduation and beyond. In short, the educators stressed a list of five different principles for an effective journalism capstone experience:

- Transition to work and professional practice
- Integration and extension of prior learning
- Authentic and contextualized experiences
- Student ownership and independence
- Continued development of critical inquiry and creativity

These principles show close similarities to the list of general principles that Lee (2015) found in her research on capstone curriculum. She argues that general principles that cater for diverse courses suit a wide variety of disciplinary capstone units. However, it must be noted that some educators were not in full agreement with these five principles, and said they wanted further debate and discussion to arrive at an agreed list.

Question 4. What Disciplinary and Professional Skills Do Students Need to Demonstrate?

In brief, the skills (required by journalism students to successfully pass the unit) were divided into two sections—disciplinary and professional.

Disciplinary skills. These include newswriting, audio, online, TV, photographic, video, editing, verification, and digital technical skills. Also, the student had to be a team player with an extensive social media presence, together with research and analytical skills and an ability to publish across platforms. He or she must be able to generate story ideas and communicate accurately, vividly, and memorably. Several educators added that the ability to generate and pitch ideas to editors was essential as well as highly competent interview skills.

Professional skills. Several interviewees spoke about the need for ethical practitioners with solid knowledge of media law, and for journalism students to seek the truth, accuracy, balance, and fairness in news reporting. Also, there was a call for a reflective and mindful practitioner who can see the consequences of their professional work.

It is interesting to note that the two lists—disciplinary and professional skills—closely correspond to what the academics and news editors recommended in the 2014 OLT Innovation and Development report that included interviews, conducted in 2012 and 2013, with 50 tertiary journalism educators and 50 news editors across Australia (Tanner et al., 2014). They stated that journalism students should be able, at the end of their course, to demonstrate research, writing, grammar, digital and social media, video, communication, and team skills. The two lists provide what needs to be demonstrated but there was division regarding how many skills the students had to demonstrate and which ones were absolutely essential.

Entrepreneurial was a term constantly repeated by the interviewees as the world of journalism in the digital age is changing so fast. The result is that journalists now find that they have to generate work opportunities in entrepreneurial news outlets and start-ups, rather than as employees in mainstream news and broadcast media. Several

interviewees argued that their students need to be far more flexible, innovative, and also enterprising if they are to survive.

Conclusion

Findings from face-to-face interviews with journalism educators at 10 universities in Australia (which was Phase 1 of a three-phase research into journalism capstone units) show that while they are in use in at least one third of Australian universities that teach journalism, there is still a lack of agreed principles, standards, and best practice to guide journalism educators in the design (or redesign) and implementation of third-year journalism capstone units, especially in regard to the demonstration and measurement of required graduate capabilities. Previous attempts to measure journalism graduate capabilities were linked more to assessment and learning outcomes with an emphasis on acquiring rather than demonstrating capabilities. There has never been a specific national strategy for the promotion of measuring the capabilities of graduate journalism students in the Australian university system. This will be a key focus for Phases 2 and 3 of this research, which will benefit both editors and graduates, as the latter will be enabled to demonstrate evidence that they have acquired the necessary skills and competencies for employment. This will inevitably enhance student employability.

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