Project Safe Space: wise practice in journalism education for advocacy and social change

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Abstract

Journalism education is facing declining student numbers, claims of more students than jobs, and the challenge of remaining relevant to an industry in flux. Wise practice in journalism education is a contextually-grounded, industry-relevant, and pragmatic approach that caters both to individual student needs and the local media environment. This article discusses Project Safe Space, a pilot study in a series of university-led work-integrated learning (WIL) case studies developing “models of wise practice” in journalism education. Conceived in 2015 against a backdrop of problematic domestic violence reporting, Project Safe Space was a model of Purpose WIL, which mobilises media action around social change issues. This paper argues that university-led WIL projects such as Project Safe Space embody wise practice in journalism education by providing grounded, industry-relevant learning outcomes and enhancing graduate employability. Students emerged from Project Safe Space with a published portfolio of work, and having had the transformative experience of actively engaging with journalism in an advocacy and social change environment.

Introduction

These students will leave university with a unique insight into issues surrounding domestic violence, having worked closely with victims. They will become agents of change in our community.

- Terri Butler MP, Launch of Project Safe Space, 2015

Project Safe Space was a pilot case study devised as part of a research project investigating university-led Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) in Australian journalism education. Aimed at final-year students, the project was embedded within a capstone journalism unit as a culmination of the students’ previous work in scaffolded units. Against the backdrop of problematic reporting on domestic violence (DV) and intimate partner violence (IPV), the project was devised as an opportunity for students to practically engage in a form of advocacy journalism and apply their
learning to real-world reporting environments (Cullen, 2017). Students critically engaged with media reporting practices around domestic violence, while providing increased coverage recommended by the DV support service sector. Students engaged in specialised and focused reporting in order to provide educational resources to the community, and also to provide a voice for those directly and indirectly affected by DV. Project Safe Space brought together domestic violence survivors, support workers, and community advocates with journalism and law students to create an online, multimedia platform designed to provide sensitive media coverage and resources about domestic violence. A key goal for the project was to ensure students emerged from the unit with practical, industry-relevant skills and experience and a published body of work that would promote graduate employability.

**Journalism education and university-led WIL**

The modern journalism education environment is said to be characterised by declining student numbers (King, 2014), more students than there are jobs, and reports of some universities considering a departure from teaching journalism altogether (Wordsworth, 2014). In addition, the journalism industry itself is reacting to changes in modes of delivery by incorporating more demands on journalists in terms of skills and less in terms of resources (Deuze, 2006; Macnamara, 2016; Tulloch & Mas i Manchon, 2017). This is not to mention the much-discussed rise of convergent culture in journalism (Deuze, Bruns & Neuberger, 2007), where multimedia production and mobile content delivery are now standard practice. Journalism educators need to adapt and respond to these changes in order to ensure graduating students are able to meet the demands of the profession (Baines & Kennedy, 2010). WIL is fast gaining prominence in tertiary education as a preferred method of work and community learning (Rowe, Kelliher & Winchester-Seeto, 2012). As the discipline has developed, the scope of WIL has widened significantly to include simulations, internships, virtual placements, cooperative learning, practicum, and service learning, but more generally includes the “intentional integration of theory and practice knowledge” (Orrell, 2011, p. 1). It is the intentional cycles of critical reflection and integration that set tertiary WIL courses apart from work experience (Cooper, Orrell & Bowden, 2010). Traditionally, WIL in tertiary journalism education involves student placements with industry partners or simulated work environments. While journalism education in the United States has moved towards hospital teaching methods style of WIL models, Australian journalism education is only now beginning to adopt this. WIL in journalism education aims to “provide students with an integrated realistic experience of making complex professional judgments” (Segrave & Holt, 2003, p. 16) in conjunction with the “knowledge and skills they are developing” (Segrave & Holt, 2003, p. 16) through their studies. Forde and Meadows (2008, p. 5) suggest journalism education has a “key role to play” in extending learning experiences, and warn against confining students to a “long string of journalism-specific courses which serve to primarily narrow their knowledge base”. They see WIL as an “example of problem-based learning within [a] specific application in a media newsroom” (Forde & Meadows, 2008, p. 6). Because premium industry placements are limited, newsroom simulations make up much of the on-campus praxis in Australian tertiary journalism programs and are “designed to facilitate active learning” (Segrave & Holt, 2003, pp. 9-10), seeking to ensure students construct the “attitudes, knowledge and skills behaviour required to work effectively in the discipline or field of professional practice” (Segrave & Holt, 2003, pp. 9-10). What these simulations lack, however, is the pressure of working to ‘real’ deadlines, and, more importantly, engagement with industry partners and the professional publication element of WIL. Traditionally, “students are quite often part of a tutorial session in a lab where the simulation is embedded in that session via an orientation and reflective debriefing by a lecturer present in the lab” (Segrave & Holt, 2003, p. 12). There is potential for a mismatch between industry expectations and education outcomes. For journalism students, it is through the formal structures where experiences and guidance intersect that WIL offers a “more powerful learning experience than...
any form of direct teaching” (Forde & Meadows, 2008, p. 5). While WIL represents a positive approach to tertiary journalism education, the predominant models of industry placements and newsroom simulations prevent the majority of students from equally engaging in ‘real’, industry-relevant learning.

**Wise practice in journalism education**

What is evident from the literature surrounding WIL is that there is a definite need for further studies into innovative, emerging journalism education practices (Orrell, 2011). “Wise practice” in university-led journalism WIL seeks to employ a variety of approaches aimed at creating a contextually-relevant learning environment that accounts for a range of different learning styles. Wise practice aims to foster “collaboration, participation, empowerment and transformative change” (Petrucka et al., 2016, p. 181) and seeks to accommodate the experiences of the individual and the collective. Seagrave and Holt make a case for wise practice when they call “for the education design profession to meet the fundamental challenge of designing learning environments requiring more holistic thought and action” (2003, p. 8). Yeager, drawing on Wineburg and Wilson’s (1988) examples, asserts that wise practice focuses on the “extraordinary” while “engaging students” through “critical thinking, interpretation and analysis” and generating “excitement about the content” (2000, p. 353). Adopting a wise practice approach in tertiary journalism education gives students the chance to reconcile their theoretical understandings of journalism with their evolving personal practice. Wise practice’s potential to produce a realistic, authentic learning experience is its primary advantage; the challenge is creating such an environment despite constraints on implementation. The key premise to be understood about wise practice is that it is, first and foremost, an approach that is “situational, local and context-bound” (Tyson, 2016, p. 5). Petrucka et al., in situating wise practice within the UNESCO (2002) definition, understand wise practices “to be those which are inclusive, locally relevant, sustainable, respectful, flexible, pragmatic and encompassing all world views, and [considering] historical, societal, cultural and environmental factors” (2016, p. 181). The greatest strength in a wise practice approach is that it recognises the necessity of the compromises needed in the real world (Wescott, 2002). The contextual and inclusive considerations combined with the flexibility of a wise practice approach support the development of innovative WIL projects/models that provide practical learning which further serves the community.

We argue that utilising a wise practice framework for project-based university-led WIL offers a flexible, grounded alternative that accounts for both the contextual environment in which the experience takes place and the various learning styles of students, while overcoming limitations of the traditional WIL placement model. Developing such a learning experience is not without its challenges: it requires significant time and resource commitments from staff, development and maintenance of partnership relationships, as well as a nuanced understanding of the local media environment and where such a project might fit in. It also requires a good understanding of the capabilities and learning styles of the students, hence it is recommended as a capstone unit. Nonetheless, wise practice presents an opportunity to provide students with a realistic newsroom and media production experience, grounded in the local media environment. Project Safe Space was developed as a model of how wise practice could be implemented within a university-led WIL program.

**Social context and media environment**

After speaking with a woman experiencing DV, Project Safe Space was conceived as a strategic way to provide journalism students with a transformative educational experience based on wise practice and an active participatory journalism praxis, designed with a long-term goal to facilitate change in media reporting of DV. In 2015, DV and IPV rarely appeared in regular news

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coverage, despite more than one woman being killed by her current or former partner each week (Bryant & Cussen, 2015). The coverage that did appear was problematic. While an extensive review of the literature surrounding media representation of DV is beyond the scope of this paper, it is relevant to note the contextual environment in which Project Safe Space was developed. Sutherland et al. (2015) reviewed a number of studies investigating media representation of violence against women, concluding that media coverage reflected societal uncertainty around the issue. The researchers identified a number of “key themes in the way news and information media portrayed violence against women” (2015, p. 1): most concerning was that media “directly and indirectly shift[ed] blame from male perpetrators of violence, assigning responsibility for violence to women” (2015, p. 1). Prior to the increased news value which led to DV gaining traction in regular media cycles, it was considered a private matter between individuals and, as a consequence, was often unreported. When it was reported, coverage was problematic. The ‘framing’ of stories as they relate to DV, and further, how framing relates to people’s understanding and perceptions of issues (Sutherland et al., 2015; De Vreese, 2005; Lawrence, 2004) is particularly relevant in terms of media coverage of DV. Media coverage was mostly presented in terms of episodic and thematic frames (Iyengar, 1994). Episodic framing positions focus on the individual, relying on individual explanations such as personality, disposition or motivational state (Sotirovic, 2003), and thematic framing is concerned with society, society’s role and social explanations (Carlyle, Slater & Chakroff, 2008), such as circumstances and situational forces (Sotirovic, 2003). Recent research around media reporting of DV has revealed episodic framing as most commonly utilised (Carlyle et al., 2008; Maxwell, Huxford, Borum & Hornik, 2000; Sotirovic, 2003). By using episodic framing, crucial contextual information is omitted, stereotypes are reinforced, and there is increased misconception and reduction in feelings of public responsibility (Carlyle et al., 2008). Reporting of this nature has the potential to place blame with victims, which in turn may make them less likely to report and seek help (Gracia, 2004). In light of these concerning trends, there was a distinct need to make a change in the way DV was handled by the media.

**Advocacy journalism and social change**

Taking into account the complex nature of DV as a social issue, in conjunction with the local media environment, advocacy journalism emerged as a way of engaging and mobilising grassroots actors in an effort to foster more sensitive and responsive reporting of DV issues in future media organisations. This research situates this particular brand of advocacy journalism within the broader discipline of Communication for Social Change (CSC). CSC views dialogue as central to change, and employs participatory practices to encourage collective action, facilitate activism, and mobilise action (Thomas & van de Fliert, p. 22; Wilkins, 2012). In situating Project Safe Space within this field, student journalists moved beyond “bearing witnesses on-behalf-of marginalised others but as a process of building connection between communities, audiences and issues” (Banda, 2015, p. 128). Though its primary role tends to be related to lobbying for policy changes, advocacy communication also plays an important part in CSC, through inverting information flows and encouraging horizontal communication (Quarry, Ramirez & Ramirez, 2009). Despite gaining traction within alternative media and various social movements in the past, advocacy journalism has been at the margins of journalistic practice, largely due to the predominant gatekeeper model and the prevalent view of objectivity as a reporting ideal (Waisbord, 2009; Janowitz, 1975). In a more contemporary discussion, Fisher (2016) argues that an “advocacy continuum” is a useful tool as every piece of journalism contains elements of advocacy, whether intentional or not, and therefore can be placed on a continuum ranging from “overt” to “subtle”. These ideas provided a foundation for Project Safe Space: the belief that advocacy journalism should not be confined to alternative media, but should become embedded within mainstream media practice.

With these aspirations in mind, the brand of advocacy journalism employed within Project Safe Space was developed. Though more participatory forms of journalism – civic journalism or public journalism, for example – may seem more appropriate for working towards CSC outcomes, in terms of education, these complex approaches require more time, stronger relationships with audiences, and more nuanced reporting than can be expected of inexperienced student journalists. Gumucio-Dagron and Rodriguez write that when it comes to communication for social change, “the process is more important than the products” (2006, p. 11). As such, in this context, advocacy
journalism acts as an introduction to community-driven, participatory reporting, while still allowing for the
development of basic journalistic skills. Thus, one of the key aims of Project Safe Space was to develop an authentic
space for students to explore alternative roles of journalism, specifically in terms of advocacy journalism and CSC.

Methodology

Project Safe Space acts as a case study in one of the three categories of university-led WIL (Engaged WIL, Event
WIL, and Purpose WIL) developed as models of wise practice in journalism education (Valencia-Forrester, 2015).
Initial scoping interviews with journalism and law students, support services, and people with lived experience of
domestic violence revealed a complex array of unique and specific needs from each group of stakeholders. Based on
these results, a collaborative research design methodology was sought in order to give the project the best chance of
achieving positive outcomes for all involved. Participatory Action Research (PAR) was adopted as an overarching
methodology in order to address a topical social issue while integrating the participation of key stakeholders. This
allowed for the researchers to craft the project in a reflexive, action-oriented manner. Project Safe Space was
designed as a capstone journalism unit that initially involved 38 students and 13 industry partners over 13 weeks.
The aim of this research was to test the hypothesis that wise practice in WIL provides students with a more au-
thentic, grounded learning experience that produces graduate journalists with a deeper knowledge of how to
approach sensitive problems in society.

Data collection occurred in two distinct phases. The first coincided with the conception and development of
Project Safe Space as a model of wise practice in WIL in journalism education. A number of semi-structured
interviews were conducted with current and past students, industry professionals, and journalism educators and
academics (n=38). These initial interviews were conducted in order to provide a foundation for the project and
establish what various parties would consider to be ideal learning outcomes from such a project. Participants were
recruited through snowball sampling, and interviews were transcribed and analysed in order to inform the creation of
a relevant learning experience that embodied a wise practice approach to WIL.

The second phase of data collection focused on the evaluation of the project. This phase employed a mixed
methods approach to data collection and analysis. At its most basic level, this approach involves the use of both
quantitative and qualitative methods in a single study (Creswell, 1999). Similarly, Deuze suggests that well-
established methods such as surveys and case studies should be used in journalism education research in order “to
empirically document the impact of the different choices available” (2006, p. 30). As action-researchers,
observations and reflections formed a significant part of data collection; as such, field notes were recorded
throughout. Interviews, observations and reflections make up an important part of the aforementioned PAR cycle of
plan, action, reflection. In alignment with the principles of wise practice, a flexible approach was taken, one that
allowed space for continuous improvement, and active and ongoing responsiveness to feedback. This cycle took
place throughout the evaluative phase of the research and involved actively responding and integrating feedback
received from students, stakeholders, and other participants throughout the day-to-day operations of the project.

Observations and interviews were supplemented by a third phase of data collection. A quantitative survey at the
completion of the pilot project was emailed to students with a link to a survey about their participation in the project.
The survey aimed to gauge student opinions and their perceived learning outcomes from the project. Of the
approximately 38 students sent the survey, nine responses were received. While response rates were low, the results
still yielded interesting data. In their discussion on response rates and their impact on validity and credibility of data,
Morton, Bandara, Robinson and Carr (2012) discuss several studies that disprove the link between low response
rates and inaccuracy of data. Specifically, Visser et al. (1996, in Morton et al., 2012) and Holbrook et al. (2007, in
Morton et al., 2012), both separately concluded that studies with much lower response rates were “often only
marginally less accurate than those with much higher described response rates” (Morton et al., 2012, p. 107). A
potential reason for the low response rate was that the survey was sent at the end of semester and competed with
exams, assignments, and university student surveys. In order to supplement the low survey response rate, a number
of extended, qualitative interviews were conducted with a group of students in order to collect additional descriptive data. Content produced by students was also cursorily assessed and analysed, however, the actual content was secondary in importance to the process of creating it.

**Project Safe Space**

Project Safe Space was conceived as a strategic way to provide journalism students with a transformative educational experience. Set within a capstone journalism unit, Project Safe Space aimed to facilitate active journalism praxis, designed with a long-term goal of facilitating change in media reporting of DV. Project Safe Space was a direct response to “how an issue is characterized in news reports can have an influence on how it is understood by audiences” (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007, p. 11). As The Guardian’s editor-in-chief, Katharine Viner, explains:

If people long to create a better world, then we must use our platform to nurture imagination – hopeful ideas, fresh alternatives, belief that the way things are isn’t the way things need to be. We cannot merely criticise the status quo; we must also explore the new ideas that might displace it. We must build hope. (2017, n.p.)

Through the creation of a professional online platform, students and industry partners published multimedia content covering a range of issues involving DV aligning with guidelines suggested by the sector. Griffith Law School’s specialist elective course in DV law was also involved. Not only did this provide practical experience for law students, but it also contributed to facilitating a peer and disciplinary exchange of learning across various schools within the university.

Recognising that DV is a significantly larger societal problem than could possibly be addressed in isolation, and acknowledging the role industry involvement plays in WIL, it was a key focus to work in conjunction with community partners. The project worked with a number of stakeholders including Federal Member of Parliament Terri Butler, Domestic Violence Action Centres, national DV counselling service DVConnect, a variety of psychologists, mental health centres and community groups, along with self-advocates and activists. Through participation in the project, it was envisioned future journalists and editors would gain a unique insight into some of the realities of DV, and address some of the misconceptions surrounding the actions and behaviours of those affected by DV, eventually bringing these insights forward into their professional careers. This project provided not only transformative learning opportunities for our students, in a university-led ‘WIL with Purpose’ (Purpose WIL) designed model (Valencia-Forrester, 2015), but has continued working with vulnerable communities and their advocates even after the reporting phase has concluded. In 2016 and 2017, students from other disciplines approached the project with a view to completing an internship. Students from the psychology discipline participated in Project Safe Space, not by reporting for the site, but based on the reputation of the project, these students were able to sit in the Domestic Violence Court in Southport, Queensland, for three weeks. The website continues to receive traffic to this day.

**Intended outcomes**

Project Safe Space had several aims: first, as a case study to trial and evaluate a model of wise practice in university-led WIL; second, to create rich learning outcomes for students; and finally, to contribute to meaningful change in the way DV is reported in the Australian media. Cullen argues that clear intended learning outcomes are critical to project capstone units so as to ensure student results are comparable (2017, p. 94). As such, at the outset of the project, in consultation with sector stakeholders and industry professionals, a series of student learning outcomes was agreed on. Students were to emerge from the project having:

- demonstrated core journalism skills across a range of media (print, online, video, audio);
- a layered and meaningful engagement with community and sector stakeholders;
- engaged in reflective practice on the role of journalism in an advocacy context;
- a high-quality portfolio that demonstrates evidence of published reporting beyond traditional student news, or simulated news, environments.
In terms of outcomes relevant to the broader community, Project Safe Space aimed to develop a body of work that showcased responsible reporting of DV and enhanced understanding of DV, its causes and effects. Furthermore, the Project Safe Space platform aimed to provide resources for community members seeking support around DV issues, as well as providing clear guidance for media on appropriate journalistic practice and reporting guidelines for covering DV-related issues. More importantly, the project aimed to contribute to developing a generation of journalists and media producers with a deeper understanding of domestic and intimate partner violence and more informed future reporting practices.

Implementation of ‘Purpose WIL’ as wise practice

Once the concept had been identified and developed, it became a moving feast in terms of pulling everything together; the project developed as each partner was engaged. As each partner became involved, their input was incorporated and the project design evolved akin to a spider’s web extending from the initial idea, with each new strand incorporating new ideas based on reflexive practice, and extending toward a variety of anchor points in differing directions. The concept was pitched to potential stakeholders to gauge interest levels. Their responses were overwhelmingly positive: each industry partner was eager to become involved because they recognised the need for a change in reporting practices around DV, and wanted to be part of that change process. Stakeholders from the DV sector were invited to be industry partners. Considering the sector is underfunded and under-resourced, but overflowing with people seeking support, partners were able to choose their level of involvement. Potential stakeholders were identified based on the roles they played within the DV space and were encouraged to participate in every stage of the process (Thomas & van de Fliert, 2015). As the project progressed, sector partners were also invited to prepare opinion pieces for publication on the website. The response to this opportunity was positive, with the state’s 24-hour hotline DVConnect Mensline coordinator regularly contributing pieces to be published. Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) community organisations were specifically included as women in these communities were less likely to report DV and often face many barriers (Tually, Faulkner & Cutler, 2008). Community stakeholder consultations determined that project outcomes should include a website, not only to house the concept and provide a venue for student work, but also to present a professional, trustworthy resource to community members who may need it. Rather than hosting the site on a blog, it was argued that the project should present a professionally-produced online media platform. Griffith University provided funding for professional photography and to build a website to house the project.

Prior to commencing the project, students were required to attend a one-day induction and training seminar. The decision to include an induction seminar was identified based on observations from a previous model WIL project (Event WIL). Initial scoping discussions with industry reinforced the need for targeted and suitable training for the journalism students. The induction seminar had two-fold impact. First, and importantly, it helped to solidify the industry stakeholders’ trust in the researcher and the university. This collaborative demonstration of the firm commitment to ensuring student journalists were well-trained and adequately prepared helped reassure industry partners and sector stakeholders that they could trust us to work responsibly in their space. The training also provided students with the knowledge and practical considerations involved in working with vulnerable communities. Second, the induction introduced student journalists to the need for increased empathy and caution when covering topics of a sensitive, personal nature to those directly involved. Social workers, lawyers, community and self-advocates, and police all provided information to student journalists that, while a little overwhelming, was integral to ensuring they were prepared to work in this space. Students learned what terminology was appropriate and how it was to be used: how people refer to themselves, identifying as a victim, survivor or having lived experience, is very significant for people experiencing domestic violence. It was important that this project did not contribute to re-traumatising the vulnerable community it sought to serve. A key consideration was balancing the recognition and acknowledgement of our dual-purpose duty of care toward students, survivors, and industry partners. It was vital that student journalists were adequately prepared to work in this space, and that interviewees were well-supported and not re-traumatised by the interviewing experience. Significantly, this was not training traditionally undertaken by media at that time, however, development of media reporting guidelines has since
impacted practices in this area.

Upon completion of the induction, students sourced and pitched story ideas, and the cohort was tasked with producing a series of original feature stories and multimedia content aimed at providing DV survivors and advocates with a voice. Based on what they learned during the induction training session, and after identifying what was missing from media coverage of domestic violence, students were to come up with their own story ideas as they would in professional practice and, having received editorial approval, they were to commence their own investigation and reporting. Story ideas pitched by the student journalists displayed empathy and nuanced understandings of the far-reaching effects of DV, and included how DV impacts children, pets, rural communities, CALD communities, people with lived experience of disability, extended family, and men’s rights activist groups. All interviews with people with lived experience of DV were conducted in a controlled environment with a support person for the interviewee. Staff were also present to monitor the interview and support the student through the process. A high level of pastoral care was also provided during the project to ensure the students’ safety and wellbeing during the production and post phases of the project. The project team, alongside sector stakeholders, provided student journalists with ongoing and appropriate training, adopting a wise practice approach considering the context surrounding the practice of investigating and reporting DV.

Results and discussion

The outcomes stemming from Project Safe Space broadly fell into three categories: a tangible portfolio of published work, advocacy and interpreting the role of journalism, and the transformative impact on student learning and practice. Project Safe Space, in terms of wise practice in transformative journalism education, served as an exploratory exercise or case study to build on the researcher’s current research around an engaged model of on-campus WIL (Engaged WIL) (Valencia-Forrester, 2015) and work at extending these processes and developing a model for journalism and media WIL projects. Key factors in establishing a successful WIL project lie in recognising the need for working closely to embed interaction with industry across all facets of the curriculum, developing processes for sustainable practice for expansion of WIL activities; and recognising the need for flexibility in the application of these activities within different disciplines and across institutional contexts. (Edwards, 2015, para. 14)

The results broadly support Project Safe Space’s commitment to embedding industry-relevant learning throughout. The findings of initial scoping interviews with industry were incorporated into the design of the project and, as such, students emerged from Project Safe Space equipped with the skills and body of work desirable in that of a journalism graduate.

Tangible body of work

The importance of a published portfolio of work for students was a recurring theme during initial interviews with journalism education academics and industry professionals. Several interviewees, interviewed as part of the research project, identified the necessity of having a body of published work to show potential employers:

... it’s handy if they have got published work. It’s exceptional if they do, but they need to have a portfolio of what they’re capable of doing. (Industry 3)

I think I would go further than that and say I wouldn’t employ someone who hadn’t published quite a few stories. It is not that difficult to be published now. Even for someone to actually get in front of me, they probably would have published quite a few stories already. (Industry 2)

These insights informed the final outcome of Project Safe Space and defined the need for a professional platform for publication of student work. It was essential that student journalists emerged from the experience with a tangible
body of work to show potential employers. Considering the changing modes of delivery and increasingly broad skill sets required by modern journalists, creating multimedia content was also a necessity of the project. Before enrolling in this capstone unit, students had to have completed previously scaffolded Engaged WIL (Valencia-Forrester, 2015) units where they gained necessary multimedia skills equipping them to participate in the capstone course and the project. At the close of Project Safe Space in 2015, a collection of 58 stories was published on the online platform, covering a spectrum of multimedia formats. Stories published on the website, at the time of writing, averaged between 800 and 1000 unique views, with one story receiving almost 5500 views. At the time of writing, the Project Safe Space site has attracted almost 90,000 visitors. This demonstrates that students actively engaged in a wise practice approach to gain experience in a more authentic way and have the added benefit of producing published content they can show to future employers, thereby enhancing their employability. Students expressed their awareness of the value of this experience and outcome:

*I can say, look, I’ve worked with these people. I know what it’s like to interview with someone that’s been a victim or experienced domestic violence, and I have real hands-on training as to how to do that properly. (Student)*

**Advocacy and interpreting the role of journalism**

Another guiding principle emerging from the interviews was that students must have a well-developed sense of journalism ethics, of news values and an ability to evaluate what is or is not in the public interest. One academic emphasised:

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*The core of journalism is to ethically report on important stories and investigate important stories in the public interest ... (Academic 2)*

Taking into account the complex nature of DV as a social issue, in conjunction with the local media environment, advocacy journalism emerged as a way of engaging and mobilising grass-roots actors in an effort to foster more sensitive and responsive reporting of DV issues in future media organisations. Furthermore, an understanding of the role of journalism in society and a commitment to authenticity of reporting was identified by both industry and academic interviewees prior to the project’s commencement as an area of importance for journalism students:

*I think the rock that I ran up against was that for reporting to be worthwhile, it has to be real. (Industry 2)*

*Yep, I think the key word is authenticity. That is, trying to provide authentic experiences, so that students are engaging in the kind of activities which they would in the workplace. In some instances, students go into the workplace and rather than actually engaging in authentic occupational activities, they’re engaged in busy work or activities which are not directly relevant, but might be convenient for the workplace. (Academic 1)*
Feedback from students roundly agreed that Project Safe Space was able to facilitate an authentic experience to develop their understanding, not only of the craft of journalism, but also of its broader role in society:

*It really broadened my understanding of the issue and highlighted how important journalism can be.* (Student)

A key contributor to this broader understanding, and one of the valuable aspects of Project Safe Space overall, is that DV is a real problem. It is not manufactured or simulated, it is real and affects real people from all walks of life. DV is also an extremely sensitive issue involving vulnerable people at significant risk of further harm. Asking students to report on such a topic, with support from academic staff and those who work in the field, shows great confidence in them and places responsibility in their hands. Students recognised this trust and power, and subsequently took the whole process seriously because they could see that their conduct and how they reported had a real tangible effect.

*Having a moral purpose is really good, a really solid way to inspire people to work harder and to work for something that’s larger than just a piece of paper or a mark. It’s something that’s different and something that you can really say, “Hey. Look, maybe this is why I want to do this.” I think that’s the most powerful experience you can pull out of a journalism degree. So, if you can do that, I think you definitely, definitely should, yeah.* (Student)

**Transformative impacts on learning and practice**

In addition to the more tangible outcomes, Project Safe Space resulted in transformations in terms of both student learning experiences and praxis. The scaffolded nature of the preceding units meant the research team was familiar with the students’ previous work, and noted significant differences on completion of Project Safe Space.

The first transformative aspect related to the students’ understandings of DV as a social issue. Undertaking Project Safe Space dramatically changed the perspective of some students: half of the survey respondents identified a deeper level of understanding of the DV issue, with one student explicitly noting: “I learnt so much about a topic I thought I understood.” These evolved perceptions were reflected in the students’ work, with several survey respondents reflecting on how their approaches to practice transformed. This practice of critically engaging with and producing content represented the “workplace as a learning environment” (Billett, 2004, p. 312) and saw students engaged in a “complex negotiation about knowledge – use, roles and processes – essentially as a question of the learner’s participation in situated work activities” (Billett, 2004, p. 312):

*So, you can’t just go to an interview with a victim of domestic violence and treat her like a politician, or him or her like a politician. You have to be able to apply your journalistic tools in a respectful and also sensitive manner, but also balance that with your journalistic obligations to tell the right story.* (Student)

Because their shifts in perception were quite dramatic, students were often deeply affected by what they experienced during the interviews. Beyond the out-facing benefits of participating in this kind of WIL, this project helped students unpack how they were feeling, and how to deal with reporting on traumatic incidents. It allowed them to gain experience covering sensitive and traumatic content in a safe, secure, and supported environment. It also allowed the researcher to explore this under-reported aspect of journalism and provide guidance on how to look after the student journalists’ own personal mental health. One CALD woman described how her husband had thrown
a pot of boiling water on her, and the student journalist was quite shaken after completing the interview. On subediting the story, the researcher realised what was missing was the emotion the interview had elicited. A reflective feedback session provided the opportunity to explore the role of the journalist both in terms of writing the story and their responsibility to the community. These feedback sessions were also valuable in providing support for the students, as some found the stories confronting. The student journalist was able to go back and redo the story with a much better result.

What also became evident through the project was how many students had come in contact with DV in their own lives, and this project allowed them to engage and explore this issue in an objective and safe manner. They quietly approached the research team about using their own lived experiences, or those affecting their families. Most were quite resolute that they wanted to do these stories, and were supported in working through their experiences.

As the project progressed, and as students developed more in-depth understandings of DV and reporting on DV, there was a noticeable effect on the confidence they brought to their reporting. This was an area that emerged from discussions with industry: the importance of students presenting themselves and approaching their tasks with confidence:

> If they step into a newsroom and get stage fright because they don’t have the practical experience it’s hard to come back from that. We want people who come in and are confident about how everything works and therefore they’re showing off their real selves and they understand what’s going on. (Industry 1)

There was an overarching understanding amongst the industry interviewees that confidence can be a result of experience working in real newsroom environments. These attitudes are supported in the literature. WIL experiences during tertiary journalism education are often considered to be a point of difference in evaluating graduate employability (Jackson, 2013; Martin, Rees & Edwards, 2011). Similarly, WIL in journalism education provides a possible means for producing graduates with the necessary work skills, along with a sense of self and confidence to manage a rapidly changing future (Barnett, 2004; Jackson, 2013):

> So that you know, to me is the biggest thing to take away and what we will generate from that is confidence, and confidence to work in a real-time environment and that’s critical. (Industry 4)

The line between shying away from difficult questions and reporting with sensitivity was occasionally challenging for students. One student mentioned feeling nervous around the victims and shying away during interviews. For the most part, though, after some initial nerves, students were able to conduct themselves with sensitivity and ever-increasing confidence in order to deliver stories:

> Sometimes I did feel a bit out of place but I think it is good to get you out of your university bubble and push yourself. (Student)

**Project challenges**

The success of the project is a result of the level of support it received. It was well-supported by both Griffith University and the community sector. The university funded the development of the website, and community support included promotion of the project, staff to train and present during the induction session for students, and facilitating interviews with people and organisations. Terri Butler MP referred to Project Safe Space as a great example of “leadership coming from the community” (Butler, 2015), with stakeholders rallying behind the project and volunteering time and resources. Using Project Safe Space as a blueprint, the project was replicated by the
university on two more occasions in subsequent years. The following year (2016), the focus turned to “Mental Health in Refugees”. The researcher did not reach out to the university or the sector for support and ran the case study simply embedded in the capstone course as an assessment news story for publication on the usual platform. This lack of support severely impacted the project and, despite positive student feedback, it was not as successful as the pilot project. The researcher did not have the energy to pursue the project as they had in 2015. Re-energised in 2017, the researcher engaged with disability sector stakeholders and the university for support. Project Open Doors focused on media reporting of disability and, based on the success and profile generated by Project Safe Space, attracted greater interest from both the community sector and students. Institutional and community support emerged as key indicators of the outcome of these projects. Though each student cohort engaged with the various changing areas of focus, it was the university, community, staff and student investment that determined the impact of the projects.

As touched on earlier, a recurring challenge throughout each of these projects was the significant time commitment required of staff. The intensive nature of the units was felt by the staff involved, both in terms of additional workload and the emotional labour of managing sensitive topics. In the OLT Funded WIL Report, Patrick et al. suggest priority should be placed on “finding ways to better resource and develop more enabling policies to encourage WIL” (2009, p. vi). If not for the dedication and passion of the staff, none of these projects would have been possible. A key recommendation for future projects of this nature relates to adequate staffing and workload management.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Project Safe Space presented an innovative model of WIL, an example of applied wise practice in journalism education developed to meet the requirements of the media industry, provided both an enriching learning experience for students and evidence of their work while fulfilling the journalistic mission “to shine light on matters of interest to the public” (Wilkinson, 2016), and addressing the role of media in reporting on certain social issues. In the current journalism education environment, which is characterised by falling enrolments, limited graduate job opportunities, and universities distancing themselves from the field altogether, wise practice in WIL presents a distinct opportunity. Applying wise practice to WIL in journalism education recognises the importance of realist, contextual approaches to learning. WIL with purpose initiatives (Purpose WIL) as wise practice in journalism education allows for professional practical participation and gives students the chance to develop professional experience firmly situated within their social context. Project Safe Space was a successful WIL case study of wise practice in action. Students produced a body of media reporting including feature stories, videos, audio, and multimedia that sought to enhance understanding of DV and its causes and effects, among the students, staff, and broader community. Project Safe Space was highly regarded by both the student participants and the community partners. The results of a post-project survey revealed that students noticed significant transformations in both their personal and professional approaches to DV. To conclude, wise practice in WIL presents an innovative approach to journalism education. Project Safe Space is evidence that, when provided with a context-sensitive learning environment, student journalists are able to transform their practice and thrive when faced with reporting on issues that the media often struggles with.

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