AUT UNIVERSITY | **COMMUNICATIONS**

New Media Journalism - a new approach

A presentation to JEANZ 2008

Greg Treadwell 2008
AUT University

'We are mulitmedia animals, using all our senses to learn.' (Bates and Poole, 2001, p 74).

New Media Journalism

Introduced at AUT in 1996, in response to the migration of news to the net

• first new media course taught at a New Zealand university

• underwent several metamorphoses as the use of the internet by news organisations developed.

Prescriptor:

Examines the digital technologies and the issues affecting journalists and online news media sites. Covers the writing, editing and site design skills relevant to online journalism, including digital photography and image editing. Involves newsgathering with the aim of publication on the course website.

Paper attracts 40-50 students, a mix of journalism majors and those taking journalism as a minor. Reasonably wide gap in skill sets.

The paper - New Media Journalism 147753

Can be roughly divided into the theoretical and the practical:

Theoretical: Examines the issues surrounding new media journalism and digital technologies, from citizen journalism to the surveillance society. Assessment involves in-class group presentation and individual academic essay/journalistic piece.

Practical: The publication of five pieces of online journalism - four stories and one blog piece - on CityBeat, the course's section of Te Waha Nui Online; plus the design and construction (using Dreamweaver) of one eight-page website to hold original content for niche or mainstream audience.

This project involved the delivery of content for the theoretical side of the paper.

The project - origins

Project developed out of:

• a perceived need to get students more engaged online; to have them working in the environment they are studying, a synthesis of form and content.

• a genuine interest in testing the hypothesis that in the digital age lectures are becoming more and more defunct

The project - background

Taking New Media Journalism Online

- supported by a teaching and learning grant of $7440 (asked for $10,000)
  - allowed for some buy-out of teaching for one semester (0.2)
  - paid for some limited research assistance

- full ethics approval was required
  - ultimately detrimental to the research (will come back to this)

The project - methodology

Data (feedback) gathered on the success or failure of the changes through:

- de-identified questionnaires (limited)

- focus group transcripts (limited)

- course evaluations
  - standard university anonymous proforma
  - specific online request for feedback

Lectures comparison

A review of nearly 100 studies (Bligh, as cited in Biggs, 1991, p. 98) that compared lecturing with other methods found:

1. Lectures are as effective as some other methods for *passing on information*. Forty studies suggested unsupervised reading was better than lecturing.

2. Lectures are quite ineffective for stimulating higher-order thinking.

3. Lectures cannot be relied on to inspire students, as they are often promoted as doing. An inspiring *lecturer* can do that, not the lecture form itself.

4. Students like really good lectures, but as a rule prefer well conducted group work.

Constraints of a lecture

Constraints of the lecture (Biggs, 1999):

1. Sustained and low-level activity lowers concentration.

2. The attention span of students under these conditions can be maintained for 10-15 minutes, after which learning drops off rapidly.

3. A short rest or change of activity restores performance to almost the original level.

4. Students reviewing the content at the end of lecture can help retention.

5. Low-level outcomes usually gained from a lecture are due in large part to unbroken activities of listening and note-taking.

AUTonline
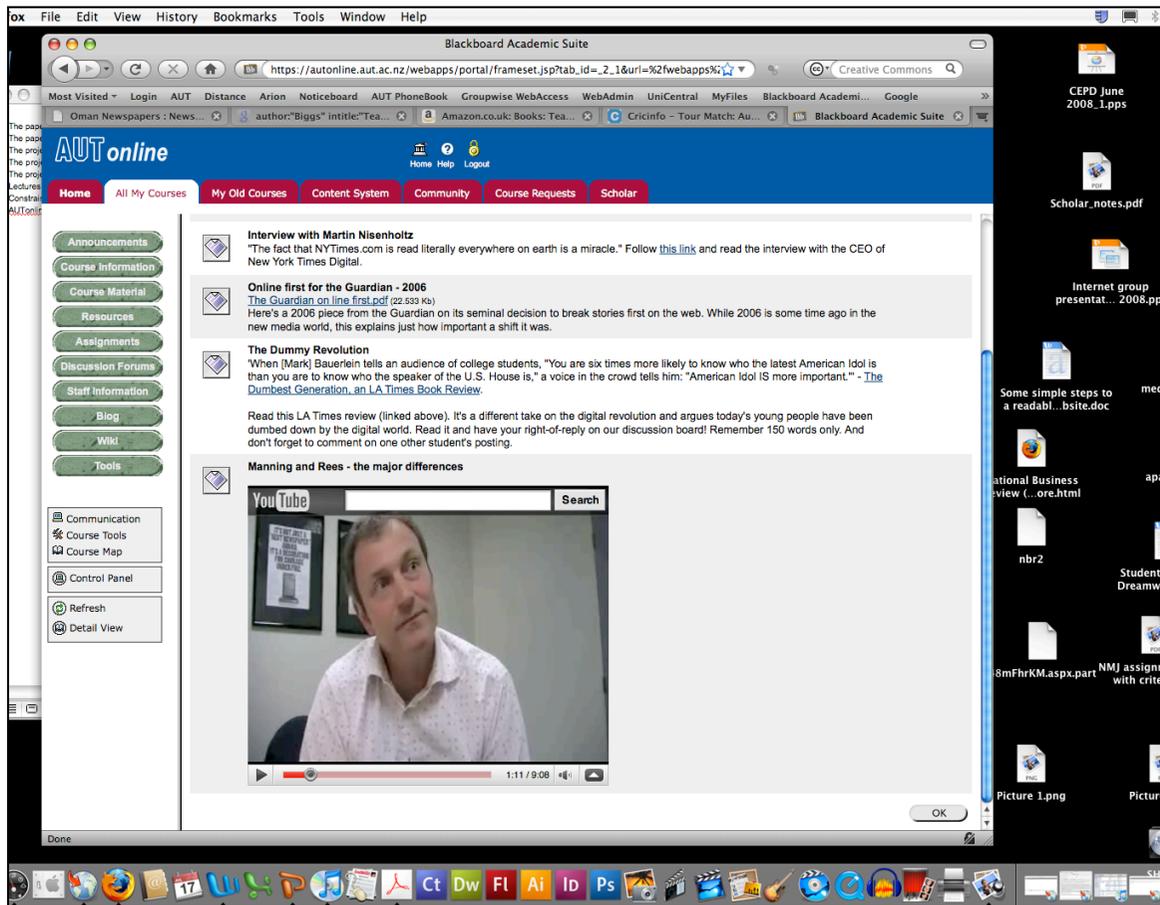
Vidcast interview with Jeremy Rees, nzherald.co.nz

New Media front page

AUTonline login

Evaluation - problems and challenges

Small sample of de-identified questionnaires   **8**

Small focus group   **2**

• Requiring full ethics approval because of a perceived potential conflict of interest meant the researcher was kept at more than arm's length from the recruitment of respondents which was in the end poor.

Data supplemented by standard course evaluations and specific requests of student cohort for feedback online as part of course.

• Students a mix of journalism minors and majors - some clearly more capable and engaged. Does this skew qualitative results?

Evaluation - questionnaire results

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
The online resources this week were helpful to my learning:	2	4	2	0	0
The material was effectively delivered through AUTonline:	3	5	0	0	0
I was able to effectively access the information:	3	4	0	1	0
I enjoyed the learning process this week:	1	3	3	1	0
It was more effective than attending a lecture:	1	3	2	2	0

Evaluation - focus group

The nature of lectures:

"I've been to good ones but they can be really boring."

" . . . people work at different paces, so sometimes if a lecturer talks really fast, suddenly you get people going, 'oh, I can't keep up with taking notes'; and if they're really slow people get bored."

"I like the fact that you've got face-to-face contact."

"I don't have any problems with the lectures, I quite enjoy them personally; it's the way that I like to learn."

Evaluation - focus group

The nature of online courses:

"Well you can do things in your own time, which is quite good. Particularly if you are pressured for time on other assignments – you know, you've got work or family commitments – it's quite nice knowing that you can choose when you actually do the work."

"It requires a lot more discipline I think to do your work online than it does actually physically fronting up at a lecture."

"[It's] accessible on most computers so you don't need to be in any particular place at any particular time to do it. Weaknesses? You are dependent on having a good internet connection – and a fast one too, particularly with the video content."

"I guess the strength is that you get to interact with other people as well. If we all did that in a lecture hall it'd be too noisy."

Evaluation - focus group

What did you like most about it?

"I think I like the [vidcasts]. I think they're a good way to get people who really know they're stuff coming up and talking, just picking their brains. And with [vidcasts], it's different to a lecture – you can go back and listen again, think about it again."

"We've had a really good variety of guest speakers as well. As X said, the podcasts are really useful."

"I liked the variety of content. We had the web-pages to explore ourselves, as well as podcasts/webcasts."

Evaluation - focus group

What did you most dislike about it?

"I think the weekly discussion board was quite a lot of work to get through. That was very time consuming – more time consuming than say a one-hour lecture would've been to attend."

"I would say the discussion board for me – the layout of the discussion board."

"Yes, that would be my gripe too – same thing."

Evaluation - focus group

Was access easy?

"Yes, except the video-casts we had to – I had to look at it at uni because my internet at home isn't fast enough. So there is that."

"I didn't have any problem with the learning materials. It was supplied nicely to us on the discussion boards and the AUT site, so it was very clear each week what was expected and it was very easy to access."

"I think for me it'll just be one more thing that contributes to procrastination. Like I kind of go, 'Oh I can't do this tonight, I'll do it at uni tomorrow', and then I forget the next day. That kind of thing. But it's not a big deal."

Evaluation - focus group

Any other comments?

"I really do think there should be a little bit more of a balance between online and offline learning."

" . . . on the whole I still feel like in terms of how much I learned I still would've learnt more than if I had just sat through some boring lecture. Because I've been to papers where it's so boring that I just end up listening to two lectures that I have to write essays about and the rest I just sit there wandering into space."

"I think the discussion board model needs a little bit of an overhaul . . . I think it might even be worth splitting it up into two groups of students – that would make it a bit more manageable."

Specifically requested feedback

POSITIVE:

"I really liked how the paper is split in 2 separate parts, but brings everyone together online in the discussion forum. It makes sense to have online work instead of lectures! Since the paper is about new media."

"I really enjoyed the online forums, partly I think because they weren't marked and there was no pressure and I could just write."

"I enjoyed the paper. I thought that not having lectures was great."

"The part of the paper that I particularly enjoyed was the online discussion boards as the topics each week were interesting."

Evaluation - specifically requested feedback

POSITIVE:

"Learning by discussion board and forum I think it good for this paper. The readings are informative and provocative and it's interesting reading everyone's thoughts on them. The discussion board is a great way to show off the differing ideas."

"I really liked the discussion forums, as someone else posted here, it was a nice chance to be opinionated and really get into a topic on our own time.""What I liked about it where the different ways we were taught and assessed. Admittedly, I did find the online work a bit of a drag it was never boring and always relevant."

"The online content up for discussion was rewarding."

"Discussion board is an admirable idea, but for me it became the last thing on the to-do list and too regularly fell off – however that's only my fault. I also sometimes find it difficult coming up with an opinion on a topic which I don't actually care about – but again, that's just me."

"I thought the course was ace, having no lectures was rad, and the online work was fun, reading people's posts and commenting on them as to what we thought of it."

"GOOD: No lectures! The interactive nature and the way we learned to really understand online journalism and its issues, through talking about them and through experiencing them."

Evaluation - specifically requested feedback

NEGATIVE:

"[I] think the one thing that I disliked about the paper was the amount of online work. Some of the the content each week was really time-consuming, maybe a little less content and maybe one post a week would have made it just that little bit easier to get through all the work?"

"I can totally see why posting in this forum is suited to the paper, however for me it has felt a like a bit of a chore. It's probably just because I am lazy but I seem to always leave them until Sunday night, which strangely enough doesn't lend itself very well to insightful opinion and comment making!"

"I struggled to meet the weekly contributions every week. Like Dallas said, it's easy for something to fall to the bottom of a long list of "to do". BUT it was always interesting stuff and I really enjoyed reading the posts and the class material - it just seemed to take so long . . ."

Evaluation - specifically requested feedback

Comments relating to online components:

Total - 14

Positive - 11

Negative - 3

Evaluation - standard SEP

Student Evaluation of Paper

	2008 (OK or Good)	2007 (OK or Good)
Students happy to recommend the paper	92%	100%
Overall organisation	100%	100%
Clear goals and objectives	96%	100%
Overall workload	77%	91%
Availability of resources	96%	100%
Overall quality of teaching	96%	100%
Balance between theory and practice	100%	100%
Prescribed reading	88%	100%
Interest and challenge generated	100%	100%

Evaluation - SEP comments

Comments in 2008

What did you like best about this paper?

"We covered a great range of topics and opinions and I think the discussion boards were fantastic – if you put the effort in."

"Application of theory into online environment for lectures."

"Online lectures."

"Online materials interesting."

" . . . and the discussion forums which gave responsibility for our own learning and were always interesting."

Evaluation - SEP comments

How could this paper be improved?

"Don't rely entirely on internet lectures – mix it up."

"Pressure to contribute to forums . . . instead of doing this in our own time, do this in tutorial time so chance to discuss the lecture material."

"No discussion forum postings! Or at least not compulsory."

"Certainly more than one hour's work required for online lectures."

"Maybe reduce online lecture commitments."

Conclusion

• Data, quantative (limited) and qualitative, suggests the approach was well received by students, who valued the flexibility it gave them and enjoyed the online environment. Comments suggested the ability to replay vidcasts and podcasts was valued.

• Especially successful: the effects of a dialogic environment, as opposed to passive reception of content.

• It came, however, with new pressures - to keep up with online contributions each week and this, at this early stage, required some nagging from the paper leader.

• Some students also found the discussion forums overwhelming because of the sheer volume of comments to read. Led to some shortcuts being taken (nothing new there).

• Most negative comments related to the volume of work, not the method of content delivery. While this criticism is made of many papers, especially one or two of our journalism papers, it may well be worth considering.

Plan for next year:

Rework online content a little, reduce weekly contributions requirement, reduce overall online content.

References

Bates, A. and Poole, G. (2003). *Effective teaching with technology in higher education*. San Fanscisco: Jossey-Bass.

Beetham, H. and Sharpe, R. (Eds. 2007). *Rethinking pedagogy for a digital age.* Oxon: Routledge.

Briggs, J. (1999). *Teaching for quality learning.* Buckingham: Open University Press.

Perry, R. and Smart, J., (1997). *Effective Teaching in Higher Education: Research and Practice*.