

Performing arts and performing journalist – a collaboration

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Introduction

This Whitireia Polytech research project looks at embedding a journalism student in its annual Whitireia Performing Arts Wananga. Whitireia Performing Arts and Whitireia Journalism collaborated to send a student journalist to Taiwan with the annual Wananga which attends an international cultural festival. Valuable lessons were learned from the project, for example about the type of storytelling generated, about the level of response to different stories and how that influenced the student journalist's choice of platform, about therefore what we should and should not give priority to in journalism training. Digital and social media became the easiest and most productive form of storytelling for the journalist, and most popular for the performers and their social media followers. The response from just two pieces of exposure, a Radio New Zealand story and a good quality and entertaining video, generated a lot of feedback which suggests quality rather than quantity is important. The experience will assist both programmes, and we hope others in the faculty, with future collaboration, particularly as Whitireia and Weltec polytechnic's move closer to a joint creative arts building in the heart of Wellington.

Background

In October 2014 Whitireia Performing Arts and Whitireia Journalism collaborated in a research project which embedded a multimedia journalism student with the annual Wananga of students to an international cultural performing arts festival. Collaboration across programmes is being attempted with increasing regularity in tertiary institutions to enhance learning (Finn, 2014; Duffy & Finn, 2014). The two programmes naturally had two different perspectives on the research, given what they wanted to achieve.

For performing arts, the intention was to lift the profile of this touring group, particularly for the New Zealand audience. The students studying for the Bachelor of Applied Arts (Performing Arts) undertake an international Wananga each year. The Wananga is a significant, annual event which showcases New Zealand indigenous performing arts to the world. It is typical of the

transformative potential of Maori performing arts espoused by Royal (cited in Hindle, 2010) and his explanation of the Māori worldview of the concepts of interconnectedness of understanding, doing, and being. Each year's tour has a remarkable impact on the students, who behave as cultural ambassadors while they are being hosted in other countries and build relationships with performers from numerous other nations. The result is that the group is famous in Europe and North America but not well-known in New Zealand. Host festivals make annual requests for Whitireia to return, and one such event is the Nan Ying International Folklore Festival which was the 2014 destination. Whitireia Performing Arts has constantly sought ways to achieve New Zealand exposure for the Wananga because telling the story for New Zealand audiences is important not only to Whitireia but to the students and their families.

Performing arts' desire to lift the profile of the programme may typify organisations which take control of their public profile through the work of trained journalists (Deuze, 2011; O'Donnell et al., 2012), but for journalism the focus was different. Journalism saw the opportunity to trial a live multimedia experience for a student. These are regularly done during the one-year National Diploma in Journalism within the familiar environment of the student newsroom, however travelling overseas on a project was new. Having a journalist embedded in the well-organised Wananga providing material for a number of platforms including print, video, radio, digital imagery and social media was seen as an opportunity. For Whitireia Journalism a major part of its training is preparing students for the real multimedia world of news (Deuze, 2011; Singer, 2011). The research project was significant as it would capture the events and interactions as they unfolded and provide a record of the Wananga which had not been formally done before. Using multiple convergent media practices would provide instant reports and hopefully a community of interest in New Zealand. The outcome was to inform approaches to other events that the Journalism programme could cover.

While there were quite separate goals for both programmes, the project was also significant as it is the first collaboration on such a scale between journalism and performing arts. The intention was to build relationships between students and staff to better serve both areas of the faculty. Such collaboration was an opportunity to test possibilities that could arise when numerous programmes are based at the new creative arts centre in Cuba St from 2018. The project, therefore, could build cross-programme research, expand opportunities and understanding of diversity reporting, provide understanding of journalism students reporting objectively but ethically while covering Whitireia topics, provide learning and a demonstration tool for journalism students operating in a converged media environment in the field

Methodology

Choosing the journalism student involved calling for applicants and interviews with the tour leader, plus the performing arts and journalism programme leaders. The project was announced six weeks after the start of the 36-week National Diploma in Journalism programme, and the tour was 16 weeks into the programme. Applicants had to put together a comprehensive portfolio of recent work. The panel assessed a combination of recent writing and photography performance on the programme, and digital media engagement, including social media and understanding of technology which would make video-for-web training more efficient. Weight was also given to the student's interview. Building relatedness between the performers and the student was seen as important in the build-up to departure on the tour. The journalist attended some practices, and covered a pre-tour event.

Multiple tools were used by performing arts and journalism to analyse the effectiveness of the research project. Co-researcher Pip Byrne accompanied the tour and, as a former journalist, edited the stories on tour before publication, and kept a reflective diary during the two-week tour documenting the events, noting coverage produced by the journalist. On completion of the tour the co-researchers evaluated feedback and documented data from Facebook, the Wananga blog, Twitter, YouTube and any published or broadcast material in mainstream media, and on Whitireia Journalism's NewsWire.co.nz news website.

The following is a numerical tally of the embedded journalist's outputs:

Mainstream radio media, 1 (Rerekura, E 2014);

Wananga blog 20 posts (Whitireia Performing Arts Take on Taiwan Wordpress, 2014);

Youtube, 11 videos (Lau, 2014);

Facebook, 25 posts, 400-plus likes (Whitireia Performing Arts take on Taiwan Facebook, 2014);

NewsWire, 7 stories (Lau, 2014);

The output numbers show regular social media activity in the digital media sphere, but a low number of fully produced stories in the traditional areas of radio, print and none in TV.

Findings

The findings have been broken into two broadly reflective areas, performing arts and journalism.

Pip Byrne has received regular comments since the tour from people who heard her being interviewed on Radio New Zealand's Te Manu Korihi news. Similarly, the production of a final video to music (Lau, 2014b) was well received throughout Whitireia Polytechnic and generated

a lot of social media interaction and sharing. At the time of writing it had been viewed 670 times from YouTube. However, the reflective diary showed a concern about the lack of traditional text-based stories being produced compared to the plan for publishing on a daily basis. There were lack of available hard news stories, which had been the focus of his training to date, and he had not had time to fully develop the eye for lighter stories often described in news media as colour stories.

The most obvious success story from the journalism perspective was the digital media posting on Facebook (Whitireia Performing Arts take on Taiwan Facebook, 2014), YouTube (Lau, 2010), Twitter and the blog (Whitireia Performing Arts Take on Taiwan Wordpress, 2014). The Whitireia Journalism social media tutor assessing the output as part of a journalism social media requirement made the following comments: "...your "behind-the-scenes" photo posts to Facebook are better than many professional journalists'... you show a good awareness of what tidbits might be interesting to laypeople about the stories you're working on and the people you interview. With your #WhitireiaTaiwan hashtag you nicely collated your rolling updates, and across several different platforms." (Personal communication, E. Hunt, 2014). In a debrief with journalism programme manager Bernie Whelan the student felt he had been well prepared, his equipment was good, Facebook went well climbing from 130 likes to more than 370 through the tour (now more than 400), he was satisfied with his blog and Twitter feed, and the blog biographies in particular. He said he struggled with the long days, with being able to source media-related requirements such as printing for story proofing, and with drawing out information from younger tour members in the first year as students. The journalism programme manager's observation was that there was a lack of print-based stories to feed to the list of media site which were comprehensively researched prior to the tour. The journalism video-for-web tutor's assessment of the video was that there was improvement over the span off the tour, but the videos were predominantly entertainment-style storytelling appealing to young people, rather than traditional news in style.

However, it must be acknowledged that when the student found difficulty generating print stories he gravitated to visual stories which suited the topic, and when posted on YouTube they generated great response in the social networks off tour members, and therefore the student logically put more time and effort into these.

Discussion

Reflecting from a performing arts perspective, the journalism student connected with the performing students and developed strong relationships which will continue through their careers. All the performing students engaged with his projects and willingly put aside time to feature in social media events. The number of Facebook posts and likes was very pleasing. Likes have now climbed to over 400, which shows that people are still visiting and that this element

of the research was a success. Even better, the most successful video on YouTube has been shared close to 700 times. The biggest challenge was finding hard news stories within a context that provided mostly colour stories and a perception that such stories might not be picked up by mainstream media in New Zealand. The interview with Radio New Zealand's Te Manu Korihi programme gave coverage to the Wananga and to the programme, and anecdotally the programme manager received a large amount of feedback on her return.

Reflecting from a journalism perspective, the journalism student gravitated more naturally to the digital media that he predominantly consumes and enjoys interacting with. They were also easy to deliver quickly as long as there is an internet connection, although it was also obvious that a lot of time and effort had gone into producing the videos. The fewer traditional media results from the project were a reflection that the preparation and the event itself all took place within the first 16 weeks of the 36-week journalism training programme. Because of the timing of the tour in relation to his training, the journalism student had yet to develop some of the skills of identifying colour print news stories, which only become ingrained with time across the breadth of the 36-week journalism programme. Working in dynamic situations such as events is also part of journalism training, but it is always difficult managing it early in journalism training. Hence, journalism recommends that if an embedded journalist were to go on another wananga, then it would be better later in the programme rather than midway through, to give the student the time to develop the broadest possible range of newsgathering skills. Future collaboration initiatives should ensure there is plenty of time allowed for better development of processes, for example ensuring student support system to ensure a range of story platforms are addressed for older news consumers. The popularity of the visual and shorter and quicker social media storytelling raises questions of what priority weighting should be given to these forms of training against traditional journalism training.

Summary

The object of research project was increase knowledge and understanding of the Wananga in New Zealand, thereby lifting the profile of the Whitireia Performing Arts Programme. One Radio New Zealand story and six NewsWire stories was not enough to build a traditional profile to showcase for older audiences. However the digital media that was produced, particularly social and video, attracted audiences and reaction. Journalism wanted to see how a digitally savvy journalist-in-training would perform being immersed for two weeks in an embedded environment. It was clear that, like performing arts, some more traditional media results would have been preferred. However the digital channel outputs which are watched by younger age groups who are potential students did attract a lot of attention and were rated highly by the journalism social media tutor. As programmes increasingly collaborate toward the new Whitireia-Weltec creative arts building in 2018, it is recommended that time be devoted to

planning at the beginning of any joint initiatives to ensure a range of potential audiences are satisfied.

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