

When my sub-editor is a nit-picking bot: Mediating roles of a TV news scriptwriting exercise

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Extended Abstract

Introduction

Recognising the need for media students at the University of Cape Town to be exposed to the praxis of news scriptwriting, along with an interest to explore what opportunities educational technology could provide, we developed the NewsScripts exercise. The web-based TV news scriptwriting exercise requires students to write a script to match video employing a news writing style through applying the conventions and genre elements taught in lectures. The more important transformational opportunity for students regards deepening their own critical media analysis skills. These generic critical skills are seen as readily transferrable to workplaces contexts.

Underlying the curricula of university media programmes are tensions around finding an appropriate mix of analytical skills and critique with more practical ones. In universities, analysis and critique hold a high academic standing over workplace skills. Yet media lecturers often observe that although students may be able to articulate ideas presented in lectures, they typically struggle with putting these into practice consistently. This is understandable given students' very limited exposure to the conventions and practices of media production.

In large classes the traditional mode of teaching is predominantly lecture presentations with essays as the mode of assessment. A lecturer might highlight features of the genre and stylistic elements from broadcast and print media. However, with increasing class sizes there are fewer opportunities to develop any practical skills to deepen understanding of these genres and stylistic elements. Even when such opportunities are provided, it is challenging to entrench these as alternative forms of assessment to an essay.

Here we describe successive cycles of the design of NewsScripts intersected with the informal discussion around introducing practical skills into the assessment in a large course. This process extended over the last twelve years. It is not the NewsScripts software that is of interest, nor do we suggest a single exercise can transform students into scriptwriters, but rather we focus on the mediating role of design discussions and how new solutions emerged. The learning design problems are informally articulated and generally no straightforward solutions can be recognised. In our analysis we draw on activity theory, particularly Engeström's concept of expansive learning, to describe changes, transformations and reflection in the design and development of NewsScripts. We focus on the learning within the group of people who developed and used NewsScripts to support student understanding of media writing.

Context

The social setting includes the people working in the Centre of Film and Media Studies (CFMS) and the Centre of Education Technology (CET) at the University of Cape Town. Educational technologists from CET collaborated with CFMS staff to address some of the large class and practical skills challenges in the curriculum. The NewsScripts exercise was not something commissioned by CFMS, rather it is a product of on-going collaboration around the curricula needs that mediated discussions (van der Vliet & Deacon 2004). This is different to how some educational technology textbooks envisage the development of learning interventions centred on the role of a developer (e.g., Dabbagh & Bannan-Ritland 2005, Clark & Mayer 2003). Here we argue that the broadening the focus of analysis beyond the role of educational technologists is important. This is closer to a conversation between lecturers and designers (Laurillard 2002, Conole 2008). This provides insight into the learning of a group of educators engaging around a common problem of addressing student learning needs.

In 2001 Professor Ian Glenn was consulting with media professionals on their expectations of a university graduate (van der Vliet & Deacon 2004). He later published some of these reflections (Glenn 2005). He saw contradictions with preparing students for the workplace in a new media landscape where even trained journalists were unlikely to gain work as formal journalists; so why should a university curriculum focus on these specific skills? He argued for CFMS graduates to be provided with analytical ability and writing skills that would prepare them to follow a diverse range of careers paths and expose them to many areas in emerging media environments. The CFMS curricula thus emphasised writing and the mechanics of story as a narrative (Glenn, 2005). The objective is distinct from that at other institutions with curricula which prepares students for careers in media and journalism (Botha & de Beer 2007).

The new media curriculum was also being influenced by multimodality and the multiliteracy pedagogies of Kress (2003). This is premised on the observation that there are currently shifts in how the written language is used to communicate. This is especially true of any media where the visual is now privileged and used together with written text. TV news is considered more authoritative than newspaper reports, placing greater demands on scriptwriters. As the CFMS media courses emphasise, this has implications for the forms and functions of writing and how understandings are shaped by visuals.

The structure of the three-year curriculum makes it difficult for a student in the first half of their degree to recognise this media writing focus. Most of the more practical skills and writing support provided in the production streams and senior courses for which students compete to enter in the last one-and-a-half years of their three-year degree programme. The production streams typically have around 24 students in each. The earlier courses are larger with fewer opportunities for students to be exposed to the types of skills they may need. It was in this context than NewsScripts was conceived.

Theoretical frame

As a conceptual framework, activity theory is well suited to investigating the interactions of people in the context we have described where they have a common purpose. Activity theory helps identify the unit of analysis, referred to as an activity system. In our case this involves a group of people educators (i.e., subjects), who use tools that included NewsScripts (i.e., mediating artefacts), to

address students learning needs relating to media writing skills (i.e., shared purpose). Importantly, an activity system may encompass technological together with social aspects. As a research frame, it supports the bringing together of a group of people's perspectives, experiences, and actions with values, community and work practices as the unit of analysis. Activity systems are not stable but rather in a state of change that is mediated and transformed by tools and the actions. We can observe how people develop their identities through their use of tools and can negotiate with the social and technological environment to solve problems and learn (Caroll *et al.* 2006).

The Finnish educational researcher, Yrjo Engeström, in extending activity theory recognised five principles for describing any activity system (Engeström 1987, 2001):

1. A collective, artefact-mediated and object orientated activity system, seen in its network relations to other activity systems, is the prime unit of analysis.
2. Activity systems are multi-voiced and the division of labour creates different positions for participants, who carry their own diverse histories, and the activity system itself carries multiple layers and strands of history.
3. Activity systems take shape and get transformed over lengthy periods of time (historicity).
4. Contradictions (historically accumulating structural tensions within and between activity systems) play a central role as sources of change and development.
5. There exists the possibility of expansive transformation (i.e. learning) in activity systems.

These principles are used to describe the model of expansive learning involving staged cycles of transformation. Expansive learning is not the same type of learning experienced by say the students in a media course. In a course the learning outcomes are clearer and the lecturer possesses the knowledge that students are intend to learn. In expansive learning people 'learn something that is not yet there' (Engeström & Sannino 2010 : 2). The staged cycle can be summarised as (a) questioning practices, (b) analysing past and existing practices, (c) jointly building new models, concepts, artefacts for new practices (d) analysing and discussing models, concepts, artefacts (e) implementing these (f) reflecting on and evaluating processed and (g) consolidating new practices.

Using this frame we describe aspects of NewsScripts' evolving learning design and how this related to the objectives of supporting media writing in the CFMS curriculum. Expansive learning can be viewed as what happens as a matter of course, as people seek to improve practices and address common problems. This helps structure our observations of the NewsScripts learning design process. Neither the outcomes nor the pathways were known to us prior to developing the scriptwriting exercise; these had to be discovered and negotiated collaboratively. It is not a product of a designed policy, although it would 'make sense to develop and pursue policies that can make expansive learning less painful and troublesome' (Engestrom & Sannino 2010 : 18).

NewsScripts on paper

We suggested a scriptwriting exercise to Ian Glenn in August 2001 who convenes the media studies programme. He welcomed the idea and suggested it replaced a multiple choice test and would contribute 10% of the final course mark. There was insufficient time to develop an online exercise, so we decided on a paper-based exercise for the first year. This experience would then enable us to reflect on and question the existing practices before develop a web-based version.

While considering what footage to use, the dramatic events on 11 September 2001 overwhelmed news coverage at the time and became the obvious choice. Such a dramatic event is ideal for our purposes as it does not need any introduction and, while in the past, can be made fresh in peoples' minds. This enables students to imagine themselves as journalists reporting on such recollected news events. We edited a one-minute TV news story that then requires students to research and write an accompanying 180-word script.

The exercise ran as a class test two weeks after 9/11, with our one-minute of footage being projected in the lecture hall and continually looping. Printed sheets with space for writing the script alongside each clip were handed out. We provided newspaper clippings and magazine articles for students' to source additional information.

In marking the scripts we noted students had, despite our reminders, great difficulty matching length of their script to that of the footage and applying the news writing conventions. What impressed the lecturers was that students took it seriously and applied themselves. This was the first iteration of the expansive learning cycle in which we developed a scriptwriting exercise, while also recognising unanticipated contradictions.

NewsScripts online

Feedback from students on the paper version of NewsScripts was very positive. A number remarked that this scriptwriting exercise motivated them by offering a clearer understanding of what work in the media involved. Yet we struggled to address the difficulties of working in a large class context. Beyond the operational issues of time pressures and accommodating absent students, were the much deeper questions about the pedagogy. Even talented students were struggling to apply the media writing conventions, with many scripts being better described as detailed notes rather than broadcastable scripts. The assessment focused on writing style, however if students overlook scriptwriting conventions such as writing to picture and matching the word length to the length of clips, then it is difficult to assess such a piece of writing as it cannot ever be considered for broadcasting.

Our plans for the web-based version of NewsScripts were to address the operational issues. The alignment of the assessment to the online pedagogy required new solutions. Pedagogic strategies advocated by web designers is to place associated instructions, images and user input close to one another (Clark & Mayer 2003). Such a multimodal text addresses the difficulties student experience matching their script to picture by having the video clip segment alongside the text box where they wrote their script. There is though insufficient screen space to list all scriptwriting conventions alongside a script. Even if there were, the long list is unlikely to be of help to students. Rather we developed an automated feedback mechanism that displays a message reminding students of only those conventions that they should be reminded about. It does not claim to be fool proof and is voiced as a picky sub-editor. Students can choose to ignore the feedback and are expected to revisit the material they are provided with that gives a much more detailed description of media wiring conventions.

Two categories of feedback are provided, namely to remind students of what news readers require of any script and to encourage an appropriate writing style that news editors expect. Examples of the first relate to broadcast readability; a newsreader can read at no more than about three words

per second and shortened forms such as '417m' must be written out in full. The second category identifies words or phrases that news editors would flag. For example, the phrase 'as you can see' and 'the footage shows' convey no information to a viewer as they are already viewing the images on screen. Another example is choosing the appropriate voice. In lectures students are presented with analysis of how news writing genres emerged that enable journalists to write about past events that are then being viewed 'live' in someone's living room. As one of the lecturer observed:

Writing in the present tense about events in the past within TV or radio news reports does serve to structure the degree of association between the commentator and the events.

From these types of insights, the automated feedback was designed to remind students of the writing issues discussed in lectures. For our purposes, if words such as 'were' are used in their script, a student probably wrote in the past tense and used the passive voice. The feedback then reminded the student of the importance of these issues. In comments students often made reference to this feedback that challenged them:

The feedback also helped tremendously in terms of the active voice being pointed out to me.

It seemed as though it would be easy to write a TV news script, but in actuality it a lot more difficult.

Thinking of what to say and then having to match it to the visuals and to get the timing requires a lot of writing and rewriting and editing.

We were fortunate to have inspiring lecturers involved who had a vision for how to teach the theory, analysis and writing skills. As they could not attend all the sessions or necessarily repeat all their comments, in subsequent years we incorporated some of their remarks into the automated feedback where this was possible. Students responded well to both the automated and lecturer feedback. By freeing the lecturers from providing mundane feedback, these discussions were introduced to make relevant issues journalists do balancing the competing needs of broadcaster, and audience or rating versus responsibility. Through this process, we became reasonably successful in reinforcing and aligning the assessment criteria in the large class context.

The scriptwriting was challenging for both weaker and stronger students. Students who took it for granted that they wrote well were being challenged to write within the constraints of the TV news style. Some students, who had previously not responded to academic essay writing, glimpsed a potential alternative avenue for future work. At times, it seemed that they were prepared to invest considerable more effort in researching and improving this assignment, than their standard essay assignments.

Conclusion

This paper used the activity theory frame to reflect on the question why it is so challenging to integrate learning activities into a curriculum. The NewsScripts exercise is a very specific case that highlights some of the underlying challenges developing educational technology interventions. The argument for aligning media writing activities with the curriculum is clear, but has to be balanced with many practical and conceptual challenges. Students see contradictions between university essay writing and media writing differently to lecturers, with most expecting to be better equipped

for the work place and to interpret the critique and theory. It might also be that the expectations of students are unrealistic, possibly being influenced by the way media writing is portrayed in films and television (Trimbur 2000). However, as John Trimbur suggests, avoiding teaching about how the media is manufactured is 'isolating an education in writing from the means of production and delivery' (2000 : 189).

Having addressed many of the initial pedagogic concerns of running a scriptwriting task in a large class, new questions emerged around sustaining and entrenching NewsScripts. In subsequent years greater attention was given supporting tutors' roles, integration with the learning management system and adapting to course changes. In some years the exercise was not used because it could not be accommodated in the course, but has been used in most of the twelve-years since it was first developed.

Based on our positive experiences with NewsScripts, we developed two other technology-based exercises. The first was NewsBreaks that enabled clip selection and sequencing in addition to scriptwriting (van der Vliet & Deacon 2004). The second was Director's Cut which was designed to support students understanding of spectatorship in film theory (Deacon *et al.* 2011). It included additional feedback related to the sequencing of clips, making students aware of their cinematographic choices. The CFMS curriculum also developed further and more attention was given to developing student writing (Glenn 2005).

In the framework of activity theory four questions are used to examine the principle of expansive learning (Engeström 1987, 2001). These four central questions that we reflected on are:

- *Who are learning?* In the activity system we describe, this is the CFMS teaching staff and educational technologists.
- *Why do they learn?* There were perceived pressures on the media studies curriculum at the university to incorporate writing skills and expose students to practices of media production. These were highlighted in the establishment of CFMS as a new curriculum that attracted large numbers of students.
- *What do they learn?* There are many illustrations of this learning among the people involved. Here we emphasised the role of the automated feedback as a means to communicate and reinforce instructions as well as to align the assessment criteria. We also described how we explored the relation between sense making of analysis and critique need to be supported by exposure to media production skills. Other learning that the teaching staff made reference to include the appropriate use of educational technology to facilitate learning in large classes.
- *How do they learn?* The CFMS lecturers and educational technologies collaboratively designed and developed solutions to problems, which enabled the learning process.

Viewing learning activities simply as software tools, without investigating the larger activity systems in which they are situated, is likely to result in these learning activities becoming irrelevant as well as not being used continuously once developed. Using the NewsScripts case we illustrated how the broad issues shaped the learning design and supported learning among the group of educators.

Activity theory enables us to make a case for the positive role educational technologists play in organisational learning, especially in how change can be introduced. The technology plays an

important supportive role in helping automate some routine tasks, making it possible to change how lecturers, tutors and students interact more productively. We can recognise similar elements in other learning activities that have a related object. Codecademy for example teaches web development, using automated feedback to more than half a million people. Other examples of flipping the classroom include lessons by the Kahn Academy and the Storyboard Generator created by Australian Centre for the Moving Image.

About the authors

Andrew Deacon is the Learning Designer from the Centre for Educational Technology who developed the NewsScripts exercise.

Catherine WynSculley used NewsScripts exercise in 2008 as a case study in her masters level assessment course, and is interested in lifelong learning and graduate career development.

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