

Training & Teaching

Teaching journalism students how to tell Indigenous stories in an informed way - a work integrated learning approach

Heather Stewart, Michael Williams, Trevor Cullen, Michelle Johnston, Gail Phillips, Pauline Mulligan, Leo Bowman, Michael Meadows

Acknowledgments: Virginia Shearer (posthumous), Kim Smith, Carla Sunwoo and Zoe Hancock, students from the UQ SJC Masters of Journalism program and the Indigenous Voice course 2009.

Abstract

Australian journalism schools are full of students who have never met an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person and who do not know their history. Journalism educators are ill-equipped to redress this imbalance as the large majority are themselves non-Indigenous and many have had little or no experience with the coverage of Indigenous issues or knowledge of Indigenous affairs. Such a situation calls for educational approaches that can overcome these disadvantages and empower journalism graduates to move beyond the stereotypes that characterise the representation of Indigenous people in the mainstream media. This paper will explore three different courses in three Australian tertiary journalism education institutions who use Work Integrated Learning approaches to instil the cultural competencies necessary to encourage a more informed reporting of Indigenous issues. The findings from the three projects illustrate the importance of adopting a collaborative approach by industry, the Indigenous community and educators to encourage students' commitment to quality journalism practices when covering Indigenous issues.

Keywords: Indigenous Voice, Journalism, Work Integrated Learning

Introduction: Representation of Indigenous Australians in the Media

The issue of how people from different ethnic backgrounds are represented in the media has long been a focus of academic interest. In the English-speaking countries attention has been concentrated on the representation of the perceived "other" in the context of an assumed "Anglo" hegemony. This has led over the years to studies on, for example, the representation of blacks and Hispanics, and more recently Muslims, in the United States (Chiricos & Eschholz 2002; Dixon & Linz 2000; Entman & Rojecki 2001; Gandy 1998; Norris et al. 2003); of the non-Anglo and most recently Muslim minority groups in the United Kingdom (Cottle 2000; Creeber 2004; Poole & Richardson 2006); on minority groups in Canada (Henry & Tator 2006; Mahtani 2009). In Australia past studies on the representation of ethnic minorities include Akbarzadeh & Smith (2005), Due (2008), Manning (2006), Poynting & Noble (2003) and Rane & Abdalla (2008) amongst others. Studies of the representation of Indigenous communities indicate that they too are marginalised in the public sphere, whether they be Native Americans (Daniels 2006; Harding 2006; Weston 1996); Maori (Nairn et al. 2009); or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (Jakubowicz 1994; Hartley & McKee, 2000; Meadows 2001; New South Wales Anti-Discrimination Board 2003).

Between 2005 and 2009 the Reporting Diversity project aimed to examine how people from different ethnic backgrounds were being represented across the media. The studies,

undertaken as part of Department of Immigration and Citizenship's Living in Harmony program, were prompted by concerns amongst Australia's ethnic communities that they were being treated unfairly in the media. Studies of radio, television and print coverage confirmed there was cause for concern as all media showed a tendency for reporting to present people from non-Anglo backgrounds as "other", and more likely than not as somehow threatening to an assumed Anglo mainstream (for all reports see www.reportingdiversity.org.au).

However, alongside ethnic communities are Indigenous communities — the original inhabitants of lands subsequently colonised by successive waves of other ethnic groups. While the primary focus of the Reporting Diversity project was on ethnic communities, some data was collected that related to the representation of Indigenous Australians. The communities are twinned in the perception of their "otherness" within an Australian community that, as noted by Nicolacopoulos & Vassilacopoulos, "position[s] Indigenous peoples as non-Australian and designated migrant groups as what we might call 'perpetual foreigners within the Australian state...'" (2004, p. 32).

The results mirror those of the analysis of the representation of ethnic minorities and show that the demonisation of Indigenous Australians noted in earlier studies persists. A print news analysis comparing the treatment of Indigenous Australians with that of ethnic groups showed not only that they are racialised as one of many ethnic minorities, but also that they are represented as ultimately to blame for conflict with other minority groups (McCallum & Holland 2010, p. 15). A content analysis of television news in 2007 revealed that out of a sample of almost 3000 stories, only 42 related to Aboriginal people. They were fairly evenly balanced in tone between positive (13), neutral (14) and negative (15) but 27 out of 42 stories occurred in the crime or social issues content categories, presenting Indigenous Australians as either villains or victims. Like their ethnic counterparts, Indigenous Australians are missing from crowd scenes and vox pops and sometimes have their English subtitled – a further indication of alienation from "normal" Australia (Phillips 2009).

Whenever snapshots have been taken of newsrooms it has been noted that the composition of the staff and the under-representation of minority groups in the profession impact on story selection and coverage (Allen, 2004, pp. 167-169; Creeber 2004; Henry & Tator 2006; Jakubowicz, 1994, pp. 143-158; Mahtani, 2009; Paul Manning, 2001, pp. 72-73; van Dijk 2000, p. 37). In Australian newsrooms, Indigenous Australians are under-represented to the point of invisibility, apart from program areas in the SBS and ABC which have a specific focus on Indigenous Affairs. Just as there is relatively little social interaction between the mainstream population and Indigenous Australians so it is fair to say that managers and journalists are likely to have had little or no direct experience of Indigenous history and culture. While this certainly indicates an urgent need for cultural change in the media, the issue of journalism training at universities needs also to be considered. This is not a new or novel point – Hartley & McKee conducted an extensive analysis of the staff and offerings at universities for their book on the Indigenous public sphere in 2000 (2000, pp. 307-340). There is little evidence that much has changed in the intervening decade. Journalism schools have a valuable opportunity to lay the groundwork for improving reporting standards in future generations of journalists and Work Integrated Learning (WIL) may be a powerful training tool in this area. This paper describes three WIL projects which tested this concept in the field, providing environments for both journalism training and relationship-building with Aboriginal communities.

WORK INTEGRATED LEARNING

Work Integrated Learning (WIL) is an umbrella term used to describe a range of approaches and strategies that integrate theory with the practice of work within a purposefully designed curriculum (Patrick et al. 2008) The workplace is viewed as a place of learning and reflection that provides an impetus for inquiry and discovery (Franzet al. 2007). Such understandings have guided the attempts of Australian universities to meet industry needs for higher level skills, (Departments of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations 2008).

Their response to these particular imperatives, dictated in part through future funding of Higher Education proposed by Commonwealth Government (Nelson, 2003), has prompted universities to formalise the processes through which they seek to balance such imperatives with the academic mission that they uphold. A comprehensive scoping study on WIL in Australian Tertiary institutions, funded through the Australian Learning and Teaching Commission, highlighted the importance of this particular approach of matching the charter of the institutions of higher learning with industry needs (Patrick et al. 2008)

WIL distinguishes itself from traditional approaches in that it provides learning support during work task execution (Ley et al. 2008). The graduate attributes, acquired through a WIL based programme, are crucial in a rapidly changing world because of the ability of such programs to impart durable skills in communication, teamwork, and interpersonal skills. It is important to note, too, that WIL as it is manifested in practice-orientated disciplines such as journalism, goes beyond simple work experience or work placements. It necessitates the identification and application of specific teaching and learning goals and outcomes (Billett 2009; Forde & Meadows 2010).

This paper presents examples of three WIL initiatives which were undertaken to improve the learning outcomes, and thus the skills, of trainee journalists in covering Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander Issues. In each case participants were subsequently surveyed to ascertain the extent to which their perceptions had shifted as a result of their experiences.

Case Study 1: Indigenous Voice- A Work Integrated Learning model in Journalism Education at the University of Queensland's School of Journalism and Communication in Brisbane, Queensland.

A pilot 10-day intensive reporting Indigenous Issues course was trialled in July 2009 during the National Aboriginal and Islander Day of Observance Week (NAIDOC Week) at Musgrave Park in Brisbane City. The project was funded by a University of Queensland Higher Education Equity Support grant and was a collaboration between the University of Queensland, Griffith University and Queensland University of Technology. The universities worked with industry and community partners with the aim of providing cultural sensitivity training, editorial assistance and cultural mentoring for the students who took part. The tripartite approach ensured Industry, Community and Educators worked together to optimise the learning experience for the students and to refine their respective approaches to address the key concerns relating to Indigenous coverage and representation. The community partner was the Brisbane Indigenous Media Association (BIMA) which teaches Indigenous students broadcasting skills. The industry partners were the National Indigenous Radio Service (NIRS), the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's *Message Stick* program, the Special Broadcasting Service's Aboriginal Radio Program (SBS Aboriginal Radio) and BIMA's community radio station 98.9 FM.

The annual NAIDOC Week event attracts 15,000 people and is hosted by the Musgrave Family Fun Day committee made up of traditional owners and Indigenous people from the greater Brisbane region. The year 2009 was the first time in the event's 20-year history that

Brisbane tertiary journalism courses collaborated to provide an intensive journalism training experience through coverage of NAIDOC Week activities. This collaborative effort was a departure from the standard “internship” experience at the universities where students undertake short placements within a media organisation. Given the small amount of coverage given to Indigenous news in a mainstream newsroom it is rare that these students have the opportunity to engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait people, thus opportunities for on-the-job training are few and far between.

In the Indigenous Voice program eighteen students from the training institutions, half of them Indigenous, participated in the pilot.

The 10-day program was divided into three phases – a two-day introduction which included cultural sensitivity training and presentations from journalists experienced in covering Indigenous issues; a 7-day production phase where the stories were researched and prepared; and a final day of reflective review by the participants. Indigenous people were involved as cultural mentors and they presented five story ideas for the trainees to work on under their cultural guidance. These stories were “pitched” to the industry mentors from ABC, SBS, NIRS and 98.9 FM, while freelance journalism mentors assisted with story development and delivery. One story from the five was then chosen for further development and publication. In the second week students attended a round-table meeting where the theme of NAIDOC 2009 was announced and where NAIDOC stories were workshopped. Once again a story was selected for future publication and worked on under the guidance of the cultural, industry and journalism mentors.

Participant feedback

All the students submitted video diaries. These documented what they learned from the NAIDOC Project. Both Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants spoke about the benefit they derived from working with Indigenous people and gaining a deeper understanding of culture. Sample comments include:

“They’ve got a lot to tell you if you want to listen to them.”

“I’ve changed after this project. I have a lot more respect for Indigenous issues and Indigenous people.”

“Being a part of this project has really made me see ... how we can change this [mainstream] viewpoint of Indigenous people and Indigenous communities.”

Outcomes

Student stories were published in the *Koori Mail*, on 98.9 FM and on the National Indigenous Radio Service (NIRS).

Summary

Both students and the mentors involved in the project found the experience rewarding and educational. The program was repeated in 2010 with similar outcomes. It has demonstrated the power of partnerships between educators, industry and the Indigenous community to influence the mindset of future journalists through the integration of best practice cultural protocols into real-world industry contexts.

Case Study 2: *Noongar Dandjoo*, a community television series produced by students at Curtin University in Perth, Western Australia

In the second semester of 2007 undergraduate media students enrolled at Curtin University in Perth, in collaboration with members of the Perth Aboriginal community, produced a series

of television programs about Noongar culture and people. The program *Noongar Dandjoo* is the collaborative effort of students from the Journalism and Screen Arts majors. “Dandjoo” is the Noongar word for “gathering”, and that is what each of the programs sought to do – gather together people and stories from the Perth Aboriginal community. The 2007 cohort of students produced four half-hour, magazine style programs that were broadcast on Perth’s community TV station Access 31, and subsequently on National Indigenous Television. A second series of *Noongar Dandjoo* was produced in 2009 and was also broadcast on NITV.

There were no Indigenous students in the cohort and only one or two students had first-hand experience of Aboriginal culture. Around twelve of the forty-strong crew were international students, predominately from Asia. Most of the students were dependent on mainstream media for their knowledge of Aboriginal people and culture. The approach to the production of the programs was carefully planned and discussed in conjunction with Aboriginal and Noongar staff from Curtin’s Centre for Aboriginal studies (CAS) In the spirit of Flaherty’s 1960’s “Challenge for Change” filmmakers in Canada, the objective was to make a television program *with* Indigenous people rather than *about* them. (Linder 1999, pp. 3-4)

A participatory production technique was employed as a guiding principle for the program’s creation which required students to discuss all aspects of the program with Indigenous participants. To help in progressing such a dialogue the students, at the commencement of pre-production and planning, were visited in the class room by representatives of the Indigenous community who talked about Noongar culture, protocols and the representation of Indigenous people in the media. The main concern for the students at this early stage of the program was that they “might get it wrong”. Fear of saying or doing the wrong thing, and thereby giving offence to Aboriginal people, emerged as a significant topic of discussion. The Aboriginal staff at CAS explained that students who took an honest approach, who were clear as to their reasons for attempting an interview and who were prepared to seek advice where needed would be forgiven mistakes. CAS staff encouraged and welcomed their questions. The relationship that then developed between the students, CAS staff and the academic project leader was invaluable and essential to the success of the program.

When designs were being developed for graphics and the studio set there was a tendency for students to resort to stereotypical images and symbols as a way of creating a style for the program that reflected Indigenous culture. Again, in keeping with the participatory production technique and to avoid stereotypes, the students were asked firstly to research traditional and contemporary Noongar culture, and then to seek Noongar advice on all design elements produced for the program. News and ideas for location stories were emailed to a regularly updated list of Indigenous participants for feedback and advice.

Students allowed time for Indigenous participants to tell them what the story was about, who should be involved, and how the story should be told. Explaining the reasons for producing the program or story also evolved as an important element of any introductory dialogue.

The intention was to have Indigenous voices and faces dominate the program so the reporter presence was kept to a minimum. Profile stories employed an *Australian Story* style whereby only the voice of the story’s subject is heard.

Indigenous participants also had the opportunity to preview the completed stories before the programs were assembled at the end of semester. On one occasion a story had to be dropped due to the death of one participant. Production days were sometimes rescheduled because of the participants’ involvement with sorry business or family responsibilities.

Programs were assembled and recorded in a multi-cam television studio over a production period of two weeks at the end of semester. Both series were fronted by an Aboriginal host, Dennis Simmons, and each program featured at least two studio-based interviews that were recorded “as live” with invited guests.

Noongar Dandjoo set out to tell positive stories and to celebrate Noongar culture. This did not mean ignoring the truth of the traumatic and violent history experienced by many Aboriginal people living in Perth. It was possible to acknowledge that history, to speak about it, but to also place it in the context of a positive story.

For both series the completion of the production process was celebrated with a launch and screening of the program to thank all participants. This evening, on both occasions, was an important climax to the students’ production experience. It was the only time that there was opportunity to view the program alongside an Aboriginal audience. For international students, in particular, they were able to see firsthand the value and importance Indigenous people placed on the program. The students were generously praised and encouraged by people attending the launch. The stories of racism and media misrepresentation that were recounted by Indigenous people speaking at the launch provided a new perspective and more powerful truth to what the students had learnt in the classroom.

Participant Feedback

Students were surveyed at the completion of both series of programs. About 50% of students responded to the survey and all reported changes to their attitudes towards Indigenous people as well as gaining a better understanding of Indigenous people and culture. Many said the program’s creation was one of the most rewarding experiences in their University life. The benefits of being involved with *Noongar Dandjoo* appear to have extended beyond the learning experience itself and into the students’ future professional lives. Those who are now employed in media outlets have provided anecdotal evidence of how their coverage of Indigenous stories has been informed by their experience working on the programs.

The process of making the program has also been a positive experience for the Noongar community. As one Aboriginal community leader and program participant commented:

“To see people who are working everyday to make a better life for Aboriginal people, particularly Noongar people - it was wonderful. I welcomed the opportunity to be involved with it.”

Dennis Simmons, the host of the program, volunteered his time over the production of both series and was asked if the experience provided personal rewards for him:

“I was representing my people – the Noongar people in the show. Talking about positive things – things that mattered to us. I was so proud. I was so proud to be able to do that.”

Outputs

Two series of *Noongar Dandjoo* have been produced in 2007 and 2009. In 2008 the first received a Western Australian Screen Award and National Antenna Award for Community television for “Best Indigenous Program”. The second was Highly Commended in the category of “Best Occasional Student Production” for the 2010 Ossie Awards for Student Journalism. This award is given by the Journalism Education Association of Australia Inc.

Summary

As a WIL experience, the students learned professional television reporting skills in a real-life environment. However beyond the technical skills of interviewing, camerawork, working to deadlines, etc they took part in a unique cultural interchange that has had a direct impact on their subsequent professional careers. The production of *Noongar Dandjoo* has shown that where there is a genuine desire for collaboration and dialogue, a preparedness to admit ignorance and seek advice, and willingness by those who hold the power of the technology to surrender some of that power, and then programs like these can take significant steps towards reconciliation and positive media representation. A university environment offers an ideal home for such a project where, with time, the learning outcomes will impact on mainstream media's representation of Indigenous issues.

CASE STUDY 3: A rural placement journalism program, Edith Cowan University, in Perth, Western Australia.

In July 2008, eight Edith Cowan University journalism students lived and worked with Indigenous communities for one month in two Western Australian towns - Port Hedland and Geraldton. This was a significant departure from the usual ECU journalism placement unit where students apply for a one-month internship in a Perth-based newsroom where they seldom leave the confines of the city news environment. The placements were organised and financed by CUCRH (Combined Universities Centre for Rural Health), which is part of a national network of university departments of rural health funded by the Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing. CUCRH is managed by a consortium that includes Curtin University of Technology, Edith Cowan University and University of Western Australia. CUCRH's invitation presented a new approach – a direct engagement with Indigenous people to acquire a better understanding of Indigenous affairs. They financed the flights, accommodation and students' living allowance. At each location there was a CUCRH staff member who acted as a guide and mentor. The placements were broken into two parts: first, an induction into the history, culture and tradition of the Indigenous people in the region where the students worked and a visit to several Aboriginal committees (accompanied by CUCRH staff). Second, a focus on the journalistic process where students researched, interviewed and wrote their articles.

Two journalism students were placed in Geraldton (450 km north of Perth) in July 2008. First, they completed an introductory workshop at the Geraldton Regional Aboriginal Medical Service (GRAMS). Then they attended Wajarri language classes at the Irra Wangga Language Centre. They ended their induction with a media forum that included representatives from local media and Indigenous organisations. In the second part of the placement, the students investigated issues specifically related to health in the local Aboriginal community and wrote articles for the local and Indigenous media outlets such as the *Geraldton Guardian*, the *Yamaji News* and *WA Today* on *The West Australian* website. The students covered various events surrounding NAIDOC week, which celebrates the history, culture and achievements of Aboriginal and Torres Strait people.

CUCRH hosted six students for a one-month placement in Port Hedland, 1600 km north of Perth and the largest town in the Pilbara region. First, the students participated in a cultural awareness workshop run by the Wangka Maya Language Centre and were mentored by a senior Thalanji Aboriginal woman. Accompanied visits were organized to Warralong a remote Aboriginal community, and to Roebourne, Karratha and Onslow. Students met various Indigenous organisations and were invited to participate in activities organised by

Indigenous organisations such as the NAIDOC ball. The students worked with a journalist from the *NorthWest Telegraph* on a number of health related stories. The main project for the month was called “The Health Heroes of the Pilbara”. Students were given a range of contacts and generated human interest stories with a health theme. They were encouraged to submit their articles to local and Indigenous media outlets including the *North West Telegraph*, *The West Australian*, the *Yamaji News*, the *Pilbara News* and the *Koori Mail*. Two of the students attended a radio workshop, edited community service announcements and conducted a weekly radio program under the supervision of the station manager.

Participant feedback

All the students submitted reports of what they had learnt from the journalism placement. Here is a sample of replies that describe the range of lessons they had learnt:

“Working alongside Aboriginal people and health workers at GRAMS was an especially profound experience for me. I had the opportunity to listen to people talk of Indigenous health issues, and some of the unfortunate effects a lack of knowledge and access to medical care can have on the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal people. My learning was not restricted to health; I saw evidence of a strong, proud people who are encouraging their children to stand tall.”

“The time here has been valuable for life lessons as a whole. It has taught me not to stereotype a group of people... I also learnt the value of listening, and I mean really listening.”

“This placement taught me a lot about how Aboriginals use storytelling, and how they value narratives to learn and teach people. I also learnt the value of respect.”

“We received one day of cultural awareness training and I was blown away by how much I didn’t know about Aboriginal cultural and communication methods, which are so different to the way we communicate with each other.”

“After talking to many Aboriginal people in Port Hedland and surrounding areas, I started to notice how inappropriate some of the sources used in articles for *The West Australian* and *The Australian* were.”

Outputs

The students’ stories were published in the *Geraldton Guardian*, *The West Australian*, the *Midwest Times* and the Indigenous newspaper, the *Yamaji News*.

Summary

There were no great expectations about this project other than to expand the knowledge of Indigenous culture and issues among third year journalism students so that, as future journalists, they might consider writing on Indigenous issues, and that they would be armed with more knowledge than they had received in the classroom. A key finding from the sample of student reports was that the one-month WIL experience created greater awareness among the students about Indigenous culture, about themselves and about their approach to writing articles on Indigenous issues. The Aboriginal elders and people who gave their time to the students should be thanked for there was little gain for them in the short term. The journalism placement will continue in July 2011 with another eight ECU journalism students travelling to the Pilbara region to learn about Indigenous communities.

Conclusion

The three university WIL programs described above indicate there is significant potential to change short term world views and improve future journalism practice in the area of Indigenous Affairs by organising working partnerships with the Indigenous communities themselves. Within the professional media environment, the WIL approach exposes the students to mentors not just in journalism practice but also in Indigenous history and culture. The students are provided with the opportunity to model best practice in the stories they produce out of this experience. From an educational perspective, the identification and application of specific teaching and learning goals around reporting practices in relation to Indigenous affairs provided a critical context for success (Billett, 2009).

Given the success of the model in these three different contexts, it may be useful to undertake an audit of what is currently on offer in other Australian journalism education institutions and the extent to which WIL — as opposed to simple work placement — is being used to deliver similar outcomes. A wider national collaboration might pave the way for a coherent training program embedded into journalism courses around the country. This would achieve three important goals. First, it will ensure that journalism graduates go into the workforce better informed and better prepared to report responsibly and constructively about Indigenous issues. Second, it will reinforce the importance and relevance of practice-oriented learning and teaching goals — implicit in journalism education — into broader Australian academic culture. Third, by working in tandem with local Indigenous groups it will enhance the confidence of Aboriginal people in engaging proactively with the media.

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Biographies:

Heather Stewart, is an award-winning journalist and visiting fellow at Queensland University of Technology where she is the principal researcher in a 2010 AIATSIS grant. She was the joint project leader of the UQ Indigenous Voice Project, 2009-10 which had a work-integrated learning approach. The project won the UQ Equity Award and was highly commended in the UQ Trailblazers Awards.

Michael Williams, was the joint Indigenous Voice 2009-10 UQ Project leader. He was the UQ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies unit director 1992-2010. He is a member of the Goorang Goorang Aboriginal community from the country between Gladstone

and Bundaberg in southeast Queensland. He also served as an AIATSIS councillor and on the Special Broadcasting Services (SBS) board.

Dr Pauline Mulligan, was the UQ Indigenous Voice 2009-10 project manager. She has a PhD in plant physiology and has post-doctoral experience in forestry at the University of Melbourne. She has led research projects in environmental issues at the University of Newcastle and the University of Melbourne and collaborated in research on science communication in Journalism.

Dr Trevor Cullen, Associate Professor of Journalism, is Program Director for Communications and Head of Journalism at Edith Cowan University. His contributions to student learning have been recognized with university and national tertiary teaching awards and research grants. Prof Cullen is also the author of more than 25 peer-reviewed articles, book chapters and conference papers on reporting HIV.

Michelle Johnston, is a lecturer in Film, Television and Screen Arts at Curtin University. With many years of experience working in mainstream television she now specializes in teaching an undergraduate television production course. She is currently working on a PhD project that explores Indigenous Community Media with a focus on the urban Perth Noongar community.

Dr Gail Phillips, is Associate Professor of Journalism at Murdoch University. She was a radio journalist for 14 years. In 2007 she received the Vice-Chancellor's award for excellence in teaching. She was lead researcher of the 5-university Reporting Diversity project team, funded by the Department of Immigration and Citizenship to examine how the Australian media report on cultural diversity (2005-2009).

Dr Leo Bowman, is an Associate Professor in Journalism at the Queensland University of Technology. He is an experienced journalist and has been centrally involved with a strong journalism production suite offered at QUT. He has written a range of academic papers including some on Work Place Learning and conducted a number of journalism-based cross cultural exchanges.

Dr Michael Meadows, teaches Journalism in the School of Humanities at Griffith University. He worked as a journalist for 10 years before moving into academia in 1987. His research interests have ranged from perspectives on journalism in the media representation of Indigenous people, Indigenous media history, policy and production, community media processes, the role of the colonial press in imagining the Australian landscape and the first systematic study of Work Integrated Learning in Australia in 2010.

All authors are members of the UQ Indigenous Voice Project and were participants in the UQ hosted *Indigenous Voice Closing the Gap and Putting Communication for Social Change into Practice Forum*, as part of the World Press Freedom Day 2010 International Conference in Brisbane.