FOSTERING EXPLORATORY LEARNING IN A CRITICAL DIGITAL MEDIA UNDERGRADUATE COURSE AT A SOUTH AFRICAN UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

South Africa is characterised by persisting social inequalities, a vibrant civil society and one of the highest Internet penetrations on the African Continent. As in other parts of the World, digital media promised to revolutionise politics by giving a "voice to the voiceless", i.e., creating a space for silenced and marginalised opinions, positions and counter discourses. Recent local and international cases provide some sobering examples of how such voices may at times reflect fake news, conspiracy theories or hate speech. In this article I reflect on my experience teaching a third-year journalism and Media Studies course on radical discourses online at a small residential and historically privileged university in South Africa. By problematising the normative ideal of the Digital Public Sphere as a space for equal, unrestricted and rational deliberation through the notion of radical voices, the course seeks to provide students with the conceptual tools to identify and challenge the boundaries of what is acceptable, possible or even imaginable. After engaging with a set of key readings and a brief introduction to relevant methodologies, students engage in collecting and thematically analysing relevant online texts. My experience developing and teaching this course over a period of four years, including the moments of turmoil resulting from emergency remote teaching and learning, yielded some interesting insights in terms of teaching philosophy and practice.

KEYWORDS

South Africa, Digital Media, Situated Learning, Student-Directed Learning, Digital Public Sphere, Online Discourse

1. INTRODUCTION

Since 2018, I have been offering a module in "Radical Discourses Online and the South African Digital Public Sphere" as part of the third-year course in Journalism and Media Studies at a residential University in a small South african town. This offering responds to a need to teach Digital Media at undergraduate level in accordance with its increased importance in Journalism and Media, in academia and in society as a whole (Daniels, 2022). The focus on the Digital Public Sphere (Schäfer, 2015), an adaptation of Habermas' normative ideal, is aligned with my department's interest in Critical Theory and the intellectual legacy of the Frankfurt School. Engaging with a radical discourse, i.e., a claim, opinion or position which could be considered extreme or absurd (see Verhaar, 2016; Haugaard, 2022), serves several relevant purposes for a future journalist or media practitioner. First of all, it introduces the idea of a discourse, i.e., a construction of reality through media texts (Prinsloo, 2009). Secondly, it prompts students to reflect on their own perspective by having to explain why they feel something is radical and therefore realising that this often depends on one's context. Thirdly, it highlights specific social media phenomena such as echo chambers, siloses, conspiracy theories, the decrease of symbolic efficiency, the trap of endless reflexivity etc (Boczkowski and Papacharissi, 2018; Dean, 2019). Finally, it Problematises digital and social media as the voice of the voiceless by showing that such "voice" is not necessarily a positive or progressive one (Dalvit, 2021). As the end of a regular review cycle approaches, university policies recommend reflecting on and possibly updating the course. The aim of the present paper is to outline and problematise such reflections to inform future curriculum development.

2. BACKGROUND

The module seeks to foster situated and student-directed learning through an exploratory and reflexive approach. Situated learning stems from Lev Vygotsky's social development theory in which learning is viewed as "the appropriation of socially-derived forms of knowledge; which are constructed through the exchange between persons and social and cultural circumstances" (Billet 1996:263). Consistent with Vygotsky's views, learning activities provide the content and context for a zone of proximal development where students can move from what they already know to what they can potentially learn through interaction with teachers and peers. All students bring rich personal, educational and professional experiences to the classroom and as such need to be recognised as a peer with the potential to make a contribution and shape their own learning path. Student-directed learning takes place either within or outside formal settings and processes. Bandura (1971: 2001) conceptualises the idea that learning takes place through direct experience and observational experience. Direct experience is learning through one's own trial and error and often plays a key role in enquiry-based learning (Deignan, 2009). For example, when performing a Google search, students may make several unsuccessful attempts before discovering the combination of keywords and settings which yields relevant results (Khoo et al, 2018). Observational experience is learning from others either deliberately or inadvertently (Bandura, 1971; 2001). As an example, a lecturer who "thinks out loud" in class may model meta-cognitive practices for students to emulate (Hartman, 2001; Herreid, 2004). Individual differences play a significant role in terms of progressing through the four stages of learning identified by Bandura, i.e. attention, retention, reproduction and motivation. Rager (2009) also emphasises the role of emotions in self-directed learning, either as motivators or as barriers.

Current research findings in the field of e-learning and m-learning as well as Higher Education teaching in general support the choice of situated and student-directed learning as teaching approaches. Situated learning has the potential to foster motivation, interactivity and the acquisition of contextualised knowledge (Altomonte et al. 2016). Experiences from a Global South context (see Sun et al. 2023) support these findings and emphasise the need for clear goals in self-directed online learning. (Research into tutor assessment and feedback (Orsmond and Merry 2017) suggests that a situated learning approach reveals the need to consider and support independent learning outside the overt curriculum. The discussion of situated and student-directed activities in the present paper is based on my own reflections as well as on regular student evaluations. The combination of the two is recognised as an established tool to improve teaching (Tucker et al., 2003). However, though often a formal requirement, student evaluations may be viewed with skepticism (Spiller and Ferguson, 2011) or even suspicion and overt hostility (Davidovich and Eckhaus, 2019). For this reason, comments about the course are reported verbatim and the tone of the article is deliberately descriptive rather than interpretative. Individual students are anonymised as RDO [Year of Study][Identification Nr], e.g., RDO2021_5 indicates a student attending the course in 2021 whose evaluation was the fifth to be captured. In 2022 and 2023 I was on academic leave so the data for the corresponding years are not included. The module attracts approximately 100 students every year. It runs in the third year and is worth 7.5 NQF credits, equivalent to 75 notional hours. It can be divided into three phases, as discussed below.

3. TEACHING AND LEARNING ACTIVITIES

In the first phase students are introduced to the course and to key concepts and readings. In an introductory session, I explain the course outline and assessment. Feedback in earlier years, such as "[we would have needed] more clarification about the course from the beginning. It was a bit vague at first" (RDO2018_1) and "I do think that the class was struggling to understand what the course was about for a long time, and it took [the lecturer] too long to notice that." (RDO2018_12) prompted me to provide an extensive and detailed explanation of the rationale and focus of the course at the initial stage. Comments in subsequent years suggest things were clearer, albeit with some exceptions such as student RDO2021_5 who wrote:" "Although I learnt a great deal, I still am not entirely sure of what exactly we were supposed to take away from this course". The two statements might seem contradictory at first but I believe they make sense in the context of teaching within my department. As I discuss in more detail below, some students taking JMS as a major are primarily interested in Media Production and there is a general belief that some such students struggle with and do not see the point of the more theoretical Media studies modules. Learning activities consist mainly of

engaging with key resources and define key terms from such resources in advance, to prepare for frontal lessons and class discussion. Resources include both academic texts and YouTube videos by reputable scholars and intellectuals such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Manuel Castells, Hayes Mabweazara, Wendy Willems etc. In earlier iterations, comments such as the ones by student RDO2018_7, who suggested that I "Add more South African readings regarding concepts we did for Assignment 1 or rather how they are used in the African context. […] Add more videos, those were helpful." prompted me to maintain videos as educational tools (see Albó et al, 2015; Chintalapati and Daruri, 2017; Noetel et al 2021) and ensure balance between international and local scholars in the syllabus. Consistent with calls for decolonisation in Higher education (see Swart, Meda and Mashiyi, 2020) I made sure to include resources by local authors of both European and African descent.

The requirement to prepare a short definition of a key term from the recommended resources in preparation for each lesson ensures that students familiarise themselves with the content before class, thus coming to lessons prepared for discussion. This is consistent with a flipped classroom approach (Ozdamli and Asiksoy, 2016; Bognar et al, 2019) and is intended to encourage students to try and learn by themselves through engagement with the resources. Students recognised the value of this strategy, e.g., by commenting that "I also found that the continuous dictionary assignments were helpful in that they forced us to grapple with the readings. "RDO2019_7). Learning key terms is also an important step in mastering scientific and technological discourses, as familiar words like ubiquity or Public Sphere acquire a new specialised meaning (see Halliday and Martin, 2003). Addressing the comment by student RDO2021_5 that "The summaries we wrote each week were helpful for learning purposes, but they would have worked better if we covered a week's worth of work and then had to write a summary on the topic that had just been discussed "would not ensure engagement with the readings before class. The assignment requires students to write five submissions of between 50- and 100-words explaining concepts in their own words and linking them to key readings and additional resources. Only one of the five submissions (randomly chosen by me) for each student is actually assessed. Some students share the sentiments expressed by student RDO2019_2 who suggested: "I'd remove the mini assignments that we had to do weekly. Yes, it was helpful in doing our readings but the fact that only 1 gets marked is annoying.". This concern was also raised by a colleague who received similar feedback when marking only one of multiple submissions. I attribute such concerns to the fact that, as noted by Brown (2001) for students only what is assessed and contributes to their mark constitutes the actual curriculum. If this is the case, students' concerns reflect an extrinsic motivation which, though understandable, is at odds with some of the ideas (e.g. self-directed learning) which inform my practice. I try to address these concerns by explaining the rationale for marking only one of the five submissions during the introductory lesson. First of all, I bring to the students' attention that it is not unusual for an assessment task (e.g., multiple choice questions) to assess only a portion of what has been taught and learnt. Secondly, if they produce work of consistent quality all submissions are likely to receive similar marks. Thirdly, at the end of each lesson I show and discuss one successful and one problematic example of past years' submissions for each definition. The anonymised examples provide an opportunity to receive indirect feedback on the work they have submitted by exposing them to "good" assignments and by pointing out problematic areas ranging from language issues to going off topic. Students (e.g., RDO2019_7) seemed to appreciate having access to such examples. Finally, the amount of unmarked work (totalling at most 400 words) and the mark allocation (10%) are relatively small, especially if students consider they have to engage with the readings and master the key terms anyway to prepare for lessons. Student RDO2021_1 felt that "the weighting of assignment 1 the short responses were undervalued in comparison to the work put in." so I am considering increasing the mark allocation slightly in future.

In the second phase students identify a suitable topic for investigation through a small-scale enquiry using social media texts. Following a heutagogical model (see Cochraine et al., 2012), digital technology is thus instrumented as part of enquiry-based learning (Deignan, 2009). My role is mainly to scaffold the development of individual projects through probing questions which students are reminded of and encouraged to discuss at the beginning of each lesson, e.g. "Search online for one or more interesting issues or topics. It must be something open to contestation and, ideally, hotly contested. As a tip, try and identify a claim or statement which seems outlandish, absurd, despicable etc." I emphasise that although each project is different, several students may share similar doubts as to what constitutes radical in the context of this course, how to find and collect relevant social media texts, how many texts to collect, how to analyse them etc. Comments such as "I asked a lot of questions from other students and that gave me more clarity" (RDO2018_5) suggest the emergence of collaborative learning through interactions within a community of

practice, one of the outcomes of situated learning (Altomonte et al. 2016). At least some of the topics are new to me every year so our contact sessions become opportunities for me to "think out loud" (see Herreid, 2004) as a way to model the critical thinking process I expect students to engage with when reflecting on their choice. Following the suggestion of student RDO2018_9, i.e. "I would change the scope of the course to focus on a more specific range of topics" would stifle some of the freedom and opportunities for learning (including for me). The last frontal lesson of the module takes place in this phase. While for the first three years feedback by the external moderator was almost unconditionally positive, in 2021 a new external moderator commented that the teaching of research methodology should include more detail. In 2022 this was addressed by allocating a double slot to it.

Each student develops and submits a mini-proposal of what they intend to do. The relatively low amount of marks allocated to it (30%) makes this a low-stakes exercise which serves a mainly formative purpose (Knight, 2001). Marks are allocated to preliminary work done, relevance of the topic, engagement with recommended and additional readings, an independently sourced reading and style/ formatting. Marks are deducted for each grammatical mistake, missing cover page or plagiarism declaration, late submissions or exceeding the word count. The threat of these penalties is intended to encourage students to proof read their work, follow instructions and submit timeously. These can be considered elements of the hidden curriculum (Sambell and McDowell, 1998; Jay, 2003), i.e. the set of habits, assumptions and values successful students need to subscribe to in order to succeed. In the past, students could choose between different formats (written, video, audio etc) in accordance with their specialisation in the production component of their degree. Comments such as "It is very nice having the options for the different formats of Assignment 2, even if they weren't used too widely, I appreciate that they were there" (RDO2019_2) indicate that students appreciated this possibility. Unfortunately, in 2020 and 2021 some students did not have access to equipment and editing software so all submissions were in written format. Students (e.g., 2021_4) appreciated writing a shorter assignment as a "pilot" on which they received feedback for the longer essay. Commenting on an initial draft is an established practice which appears to particularly benefit students from marginalised backgrounds (Gulley, 2012).

The third phase comprises mainly student-directed learning. Students work on collecting and analysing data which they report on in essay format for Assignment 3. Those who performed poorly in the second phase (based on their mark or any other emerging issue) are required to meet and discuss with me individually. I also make additional slots available for those who wish to discuss their topic, progress or challenges they face. Beyond the written feedback they receive for Assignment 2, these meetings represent an additional form of commenting on an initial draft (see Gulley, 2012). This strategy proved particularly beneficial during remote teaching and learning (e.g., RDO2020_39 commented that "The lecturer made time to meet on a one-on-one basis for feedback and this really aided my learning and success in the course.") at least for those who had connectivity. The choice of an essay instead of a sit-in exam was motivated by an emphasis on authenticity over memorisation and performance under controlled conditions (see More, 2018; Bengtsson, 2019). For many students this is the last exam before entering a journalistic or media profession in which the ability to produce relatively long texts has become increasingly important (Kartveit, 2020). The essay counts for 60% of the final mark. I provide very detailed requirements in terms of content and mark allocation for each section, style and formatting, minimum and maximum word count etc. Many students feel the maximum length of Assignment 3 (1200 words) is insufficient. Quoting Cicero, who wrote ""If I had more time, I would have written a shorter letter", I explain to the students every year that the rationale for such a draconian limit is precisely to force them to be concise and avoid repetitions. Capturing the incrementality and alignment of different assignments in the module, student RDO2021_6 commented that "I liked the small definition assignments, the proposal and essay. I think each assignment prepared us for the next."

4. EVALUATION AND DISCUSSION

Consistent with the digital focus of this module, digital technology and digital media play a key role as teaching and learning tools. First of all, resources are available and assignments are submitted exclusively via a Learning Management System. At the time of writing JMS3 students can safely be expected to be thoroughly familiar with such system as it is used extensively in their earlier modules and courses. Secondly,

learning resources include both written texts (e.g., academic articles or book chapters) and YouTube videos by reputable scholars and intellectuals. This caters for students' different modes of learning and capitalises on the recognised potential of videos to support learning in Higher education (Albó et al, 2015; Chintalapati and Daruri, 2017; Noetel et al 2020). Thirdly, I use PowerPoint slides in lessons. The 2018 module evaluation conveyed through a report by the class representative states that "Students find slides to be "skinny". Students would like more detailed slides. [...] students have to try and jot down what is said as fast as possible in order to gain more detail, which can distract from actively listening and engaging with the lecture." Comments about slides and class discussion are repeated every year, e.g. "I found the lectures interesting but the slides were very plain and unhelpful." (RDO2021_5). Some feedback collected in 2019 directly contradicts these views, e.g. "[The lecturer's] slides were informative both in class and on [the LMS]. He did not read off of the slides in class but he taught us and the slides just helped put everything together." (RDO2019_4) and "I enjoyed class discussions and thought these catalysed some interesting examples. The PowerPoints were also laid out in a simple yet effective manner which was helpful." (RDO2019_7). I believe these contradictions reflect different learning styles and personal preferences among students. The use I envisaged for PowerPoint, i.e., to complement rather than replace lessons, was captured by the comment "The slides had limited information which forced me to listen to the lecture content, which I found engaged me and I didn't get distracted. (RDO2021_4).

During the COVID pandemic, I recorded my presentations and made them available to students in different formats (notes, audio and audio-video). This enabled me to implement a truly flipped learning approach ((see Bognar et al, 2019). Students could consult the material before class and make use of our time together for discussions. Zoom sessions during the allocated lecture times are an opportunity to discuss the readings, answer questions, summarise the slides presentation etc. These sessions are recorded and made available for download through RUconnected. Students could also ask questions via Discord, email or WhatsApp and have them answered in the following Zoom recorded session. Comments such as "we are able to ask for help when we need one, for example the RDO Has created a cord platform where we asked questions that we were uncertain about, and we were answered" (RDO2020_55) suggest that students found these channels of communication useful. The experience of remote teaching and learning during 2020 and 2021 revealed profound digital inequalities among our students.

This module consistently received positive reviews by students from the start. Since 2018, I offer this course every year. At the end of each iteration, I run a comparable set of questions including open ended and Likert-scale-type questions, which enables some comparison across years. The overall rating of the course increased from 3.3 in 2018 to 3.5 in 2019 and 4.6 in 2021. The improvement remains substantial even when I consider only the top scores to account for the smaller number of respondents in 2021 (6) compared to 2019 (8) or 2018 (16). Moreover, one might have expected less favourable ratings of recent iterations which were ran online compared to traditional face-to-face ones (Rovai, Ponton, Derrick and Davis, 2006). An open-ended question on what students felt they had learnt highlighted some differences between those interested in theoretical as opposed to practical aspects. The fact that we cater for these two rather different types of students is consistent with the nature of different scholarly traditions in the field. It is part of the reason for long-standing discussions about possibly having separate majors for Journalism and for Media Studies in my department. The views of students with a predominantly practical orientation are exemplified by comments such as, "I'm not quite sure I see value in the course for me as an individual per se because I do not want to specialise in media studies but overall, there is value." (RDO2018_13) or: "as I am not an activist journalist, and look merely to report on the world as it is, instead of trying to make an active change, I feel like the course was not the most useful to me." (RDO2018_9). Students interested in Media studies felt that they learnt a lot from the module, e.g.: This course has been different to any other during my time at [the University]. It has challenged me to think very critically and in a way that I haven't ever done before." (RDO2018_1). "After three years of Journalism at [the University], after this course I feel like a finally understand what as discourse is. I learnt to look at the media in a different way, not simply consuming news but analysing why there are these actions and reactions." (RDO2019_2). The comments above are consistent with a remark by student RDO2021_2 that "The style of learning was different to other courses but the constant submissions kept me engaged and interested". Comments such as "I realised just how much I don't notice and how entrench/naturalised things become." by student RDO2021_4 suggest evidence of increased critical awareness.

Students generally comment positively on me as a lecturer, highlighting some strong points. The first one seems to be clarity, as suggested by comments such as "[The lecturer]'s explanations of the topics covered were extremely clear and managed to help clarify issues I had been having with a few media terms for years" (RDO2019_2). The second strong point seems to be providing inspiration and engagement by fostering different learning strategies, as confirmed by comments such as, "[He] was an engaged lecturer and I do believe he inspired the students. The promotion of broad learning strategies was encouraged and I feel this was through the versatile assignments. (RDO2021_1). The 2020 evaluations confirm generally positive experiences of module content, structure and communication during remote teaching and learning, sometimes through favourable comparisons with other modules, e.g. "I felt that both the Digital Self-Representation and Radical Discourses courses took full advantage of online mediums in order to achieve their educational goals, but MLE did not. "(RDO2020_10). Another student describes me as "Absolutely great on all fronts. I can't think of anything that could improve." (RDO2021_4). While it is obviously pleasing that students recognise the effort I put into developing and teaching this module, critical feedback and suggestions for improvement, discussed above, remain the real point of course evaluation (Rovai et al, 2006; Thomas et al, 2014; see Bognar et al, 2019).

5. CONCLUSIONS

In this paper I discussed how course design reflects a situated and student-directed learning approach. Consistent with an understanding of curriculum development as a continuous process rather than a final product, the course evolved in response to the feedback received. For example, when 2018 and 2019 students mentioned that the purpose of the module should be made clearer from the beginning, that local examples and readings by African authors would be useful and that the word limit for the last assignment was too low, I responded by dedicating particular attention to explaining the purpose and focus of the course in the introductory session, by including local examples in my lessons and more African scholars in the syllabus and by explaining the rationale for the relatively low word count for the final essay. Once the COVID-19 pandemic ended, there was a tendency to revert to tried and tested models of teaching as a contact university. Positive evaluations and feedback for my course during that period support more recent calls for the appreciation of the potential of digital technology to foster flexible and independent learning. While the discussion above seems to warrant only minimal changes in the teaching plan, recent developments in artificial intelligence prompted the inclusion of a fourth activity in which students reflect on AI-generated texts. Initial exploration indicates that machine learning, algorythmic bias and anti-discrimination policies may pose some challenges in producing radical media texts. .

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