When My Sub-Editor is a Nit-Picking Bot: Mediating Roles of a TV News Scriptwriting Exercise

Andrew Deacon
University of Cape Town, andrew.deacon@uct.ac.za

Catherine WynSculley
University of the Western Cape, wynsculley@yahoo.com

KENNESAW STATE
U N I V E R S I T Y
COLES COLLEGE OF BUSINESS
Department of Information Systems

**When My Sub-Editor is a
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Roles of a TV News
Scriptwriting Exercise**

Andrew Deacon	**Catherine WynSculley**
Centre for Educational Technology	Division for Lifelong Learning
University of Cape Town	University of the Western Cape
andrew.deacon@uct.ac.za	wynsculley@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

Online learning activities have promised new ways to engage students. This paper describes the design
and use of the NewsScripts online learning exercise over a decade. This web-based television news
scriptwriting exercise is used with media students at the University of Cape Town to expose them to
news scriptwriting practices. Students write a script to match a video, employing a television news
writing style. The more important transformational opportunity is deepening students' own critical
media analysis skills. Our focus is how the NewsScripts design evolved and changed over time to
remain part of the curriculum. Underlying the curricula of university media programs are tensions
around balancing analysis and critique with more practical skills. Even when such opportunities are
created in the curriculum, it is challenging to entrench these as alternative forms of assessment to an
essay. This paper describes successive cycles of the design of NewsScripts intersected with these
curricula and planning concerns.

Keywords

Media writing, online learning design, automated feedback, activity theory

INTRODUCTION

We developed the NewsScripts exercise in 2001, having identified the need for media students at the
University of Cape Town to be exposed to the praxis of news scriptwriting. The web-based TV news
scriptwriting exercise requires students to write a script that matches video footage while 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 transferable to workplaces contexts.

Underlying the curricula of university media programs are tensions around finding an appropriate mix of analytical and critical skills and practical workplace skills. 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 attributable to 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 the essay 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 for deeper 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.

In this paper 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 over the last twelve years. It is not the NewsScripts software that is of primary interest, nor do we suggest that a single exercise can transform students into scriptwriters, but rather we focus on the mediating role of design discussions and how new solutions emerge. The learning design problems are informally articulated and generally no straightforward solutions can be recognized. 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.

BACKGROUND

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 conceived by CFMS, rather it is a product of ongoing collaboration around the curricula needs that mediated discussions (van der Vliet and Deacon 2004). This is different from the way some educational technology textbooks envisage the development of learning interventions centered on the role of a developer (e.g., Dabbagh and Bannan-Ritland 2005, Clark and Mayer 2003). Here we argue that 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 consulted with media professionals on their expectations of a university graduate (van der Vliet and Deacon 2004) and later published some of these reflections (Glenn 2005). Glenn 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 career 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 that prepare students for careers in media and journalism (Botha and de Beer 2007).

The new media curriculum has also been influenced by multimodality and the multiliteracy pedagogies of Kress (2003). This is premised on the observation that there are currently shifts in how 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 emphasize, 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 recognize this media writing focus. Most of the more practical skills and writing support are 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 program. The production streams typically have approximately 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. This is the context in which NewsScripts was conceived.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

As a conceptual framework, activity theory is well suited to investigating the interactions of people in the context we have described; 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 educators (i.e., subjects) who use tools that include NewsScripts (i.e., mediating artifacts) to address students' learning needs relating to media writing skills (i.e., shared purpose). Importantly, an activity system may encompass technology together with social aspects. As a research frame, activity theory 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 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 recognized five principles for describing any activity system (Engeström 1987, 2001):

1. A collective, artifact 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 labor 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 become transformed over lengthy periods of time (historicity).

4. Contradictions (historically accumulating structural tensions within and among 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 the students in a media course. In a course the learning outcomes are clear and the lecturer possesses the knowledge that

students are intended to learn. In expansive learning, people "learn something that is not yet there" (Engeström and Sannino 2010 : 2). The staged cycle can be summarized as (a) questioning practices, (b) analyzing past and existing practices, (c) jointly building new models, concepts, and artifacts for new practices, (d) analyzing and discussing models, concepts, and artifacts, (e) implementing models, concepts, and artifacts, (f) reflecting on and evaluating utilized processes, 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 to structure our observations of the NewsScripts learning design process. We knew neither the outcomes nor the pathways 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" (Engeström and Sannino 2010 : 18).

NEWSSCRIPTS ON PAPER

We suggested a scriptwriting exercise to Professor Glenn, who convenes the media studies program, in August 2001. He welcomed the idea and suggested that it replace a multiple-choice test and contribute 10% of the final course grade. 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 developing a web-based version.

While we were considering what footage to use, the dramatic events on September 11, 2001, overwhelmed current news coverage 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 and then required students to research and write an accompanying 180-word script.

The exercise ran as a class test two weeks after 9/11, with our 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 scoring the scripts we noted students had, despite our reminders, great difficulty matching the length of their script to that of the footage and applying 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 recognizing unanticipated contradictions.

NEWSSCRIPTS ONLINE

Feedback from students on the paper version of NewsScripts was very positive. Many remarked that this scriptwriting exercise motivated them by offering a clearer understanding of what working in the media involved. Yet we struggled to address the difficulties of working in a large class context. Beyond the operational issues of time constraints and accommodating absent students were the much deeper

questions about 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 focuses 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 are to place associated instructions, images and user input close to one another (Clark and 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, however, insufficient screen space to list all scriptwriting conventions alongside a script. Even if there were sufficient space, the long list is unlikely to be of help to students. To solve this problem, we developed an automated feedback mechanism that displays a message reminding students of only those conventions which they had probably not considered (see Figure 1). 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 writing conventions.

Figure 1: NewsScripts web interface, showing video, student script, and automated feedback

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 phrases '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 of news editors' preferred writing style is choosing the appropriate voice. In lectures students are presented with analysis of the emergence of news writing genres that enable journalists to write about past events that are being viewed 'live' in someone's living room. As one of the lecturers observed:

"Writing in the present tense about events in the past within TV or radio news reports serves 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 reminds the student of the importance of these issues. In their course 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 is 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. It freed the lecturers from providing mundane feedback, enabling the introduction of discussions about journalists' issues of 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 weak and strong students. Students who took it for granted that they wrote well were challenged to write within the constraints of the TV news style. Some students, who had previously not responded well to academic essay writing, glimpsed a potential alternative avenue for future work. At times, it seemed that they were prepared to invest considerably 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 challenge of integrating 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 it has to be balanced with many practical and conceptual challenges. Students see contradictions between university essay writing and media writing, and most expect to be better equipped for the work place than to interpret critique and theory. Also, students' expectations may be unrealistic, as they are often influenced by the way media writing is portrayed in film 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).

After the resolution of 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 to supporting the role of tutor, integrating NewsScripts 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, which enabled clip selection and sequencing in addition to scriptwriting (van der Vliet and 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 is 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. In this paper we emphasized 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 analysis and critique and the need to be supported by exposure to media production skills. Other learning that the teaching staff made reference to includes the appropriate use of educational technology to facilitate learning in large classes.

- How do they learn? The CFMS lecturers and educational technologists 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 broader 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 organizational learning, especially in how change can be introduced. Technology plays an important supportive role in helping structure some routine tasks, making it possible for lecturers, tutors, and students to interact more productively. Interest in online learning activities similar to NewsScripts has diminished over time as a wider range of online resources for educators is being conceived. Recent high profile examples with similar elements to support hundreds of thousands of people can be seen in Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) and large scale learning activities such as Khan Academy.

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