

Co-authoring a paper with your undergraduate student

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Proceedings

All papers in the proceedings section were presented by the authors at the Association's summer conference in June 2016 in London. The papers have been re-edited following discussion at the conference and are intended to inform, educate and spark debate and discussion. Please join in this debate by going to www.journalism-education.org to have your say and find out what others think.

Co-authoring a paper with your undergraduate student

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This essay explores the untapped resource of undergraduate dissertations, which can be developed into quality peer review journal articles with the right supervision and support. It is based on my own experience at Sheffield Hallam University where I supervise a small number of Level 6 dissertations each year.

In 2016 I successfully co-authored a paper with Daniel Brookes, which was presented at the 2015 Future of Journalism Conference and published in the corresponding special edition of *Digital Journalism* (Canter and Brookes, 2016). The paper examined the tweeting habits of journalists at *The Star* newspaper in Sheffield and how the role of the journalist influenced the way in which they used Twitter.

Students often want to use their dissertation to look at how social media has changed journalism but then don't know how to go about this. The resulting dissertation can sometimes be a disappointing string of interviews with random journalists, lecturers and commentators, which are neither properly sampled nor empirically robust. To prevent Daniel falling into this trap I introduced him to content analysis and encouraged him to read my previous Twitter research which coded thousands of tweets by journalists at the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* and *Leicester Mercury* (Canter, 2013; Canter, 2014). Using these studies as his foundation, Daniel developed a similar coding system and gathered a one-month sample of tweets. As his supervisor I was able to oversee the process to verify its validity and act as a second coder to minimise any subjective coding. By building upon my earlier empirical research Daniel was able to add further evidence to the trends emerging from the comparative studies of local journalists' Twitter use, giving his own dissertation more relevance and academic clout. It was therefore evident from fairly early on that the data from his study would be strong enough to form the basis of a research paper and it was a good opportunity for both of us to co-author a paper.

Research Excellence Framework

The next round of the REF has now begun and universities are already working towards their input for 2020/2021. As a result there is increasing pressure on all academic staff - both researchers and practitioners - to produce high-quality, impactful research outputs. Yet many of us find that we have limited time to conduct original research or collect data, and research time allocations are being squeezed or handed out to four and five star producers only. But there is an easier way forward. Each and every one of our institutions is sitting on a wealth of qualitative and quantitative data produced by undergraduate and postgraduate student dissertations. Each year thousands of students conduct interviews, surveys, focus groups, content analysis, discourse analysis and more, and in doing so they often - but not always - gather insightful and valuable data on a range of journalism and media related topics. But once these dissertations have been marked and graded they are hidden from the wider research community and left to gather dust on the library shelves both real and digital, in the hope that another student may stumble across them one day.

There is a huge opportunity here to unveil the best of this research, analysis and data to the academy as a whole to the benefit of both the academic and the student. This will enable lecturers to meet their REF requirements but will also give new graduates an eye-catching addition to their curriculum vitae. And although this essay focuses on undergraduate dissertations, as this is where my experience lies, the same sentiment could be transferred to postgraduates. The only caveat would be that postgraduate students may be more confident and competent to strike out on their own to publish papers without the need of a co-author.

Myth busting

In some disciplines co-authoring with students is a very much part of the academic culture and seen as integral to their learning experience. But in other areas there is a cautiousness and anxiety about the exploitation of students. Australian academic Dr Brian Martin - who has taught a wide range of topics, including communication studies, environmental studies and peace issues - argues that exploitation by supervisors must stop (Martin, 2010), but he exposes the very worst practice rather than the best. When co-authoring is a consensual decision with agreed designated roles and authorship, it is a mutually beneficial partnership much like a joint byline on a news story. And although many journalism students may not ever intend to venture into academia, the presence of a journal article on their curriculum vitae is a talking point for job interviews as it will be something that few other graduates have. It demonstrates their ability to undertake critical thinking and analysis to a very high standard alongside their practical media-making skills.

Some lecturers might also be guilty of thinking that their students, who are largely career focused, will not be interested in co-authoring a paper, particularly if it involves work beyond their final hand-in deadline. But my experience is that students will be flattered that you think their work is good enough for publication and it will give them a real confidence boost, even when they realise they won't be paid. My tutee Daniel now works as a marketing co-ordinator for the Mortgage Advice Bureau but he proudly presents his journal publication on his LinkedIn profile and was genuinely excited when I first presented the idea to him.

I found the whole process exciting and a good form of validation as other people thought my dissertation was good enough for publication. I was very enthusiastic as it meant getting my dissertation out to another avenue, which could only be good for my CV (Daniel Brookes, personal communication, 2016).

Another myth worth debunking is that dissertations are not good enough for publication. Admittedly the quality of dissertations are variable, reflecting the diverse student cohort, but even badly written work may contain great data. Daniel's dissertation ended up with a high 2.1 mark, not a first as you might expect, as his literature review and conclusion were underdeveloped. However his research design and implementation was vigorous and his content analysis stood up to scrutiny. This meant that most of his words did not end up in the final paper but his numbers did. The value of his data meant that the final paper was REF-able and worthy of publication in a Routledge Taylor and Francis journal.

I had originally anticipated that the paper would be suitable for Platform: Journal of Media and Communication, an online open-access graduate publication. I contacted them and they said they would consider a paper co-authored by an academic and an undergraduate. In the meantime Cardiff University School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies put out a call out for papers for the 2015 Future of Journalism conference under the theme of Risks, Threats and Opportunities, with sub-categories including social media. I had successfully presented a paper at the conference in 2013 and, although it is competitive to get a paper accepted, I thought our topic had a good chance, so Daniel and I put together an abstract and pressed send.

The great thing about this conference is that every speaker has to submit a 5,000 conference paper which is shared internally to all delegates and from these about a third are chosen for publication in a Future of Journalism special issue of Journalism Studies, Journalism Practice or Digital Journalism. As it turned out we were lucky on both fronts as the abstract was selected from more than 320 submissions to be presented at the conference in September 2015 and the paper was then selected from the conference shortlist for publication in Digital Journalism (Canter and Brookes, 2016).

The lesson I learnt from this process was to aim for the top before considering publications with lower rankings because unique evidence-based research is sought after by everyone. A good starting place would be to talk to the student about where they think their paper might fit and which of the publications on their referencing list would be most appropriate.

Harmonious working

So there you sit with a excellent dissertation in your hand which is ripe for publication. But then you have to ask yourself ‘can I work with this student?’ The first rule of co-authoring is pick your student wisely because ultimately it is as much about the student as it is about the work. They may have a great dissertation but are they someone you can work with, who will take your advice? And remember if the student is graduating they won’t have access to their university email account for very long so make sure you take an alternative email contact.

In order to create a collaborative partnership with your co-author student, rather than an exploitative one, it is vital that you clearly set out what your individual roles are from the beginning. It may be that you simply intend to rewrite the dissertation using the student’s data or you may want to help the student rewrite it themselves with in-depth support above and beyond usual dissertation supervision. From the outset you need to explain to the student that the paper will be co-authored, what that actually means and you must agree on who the first author will be. As the academic guiding the student, you may feel that your name should be first but equally you may not be precious about this and would prefer to give the student a boost - particularly if they are going into academia - so you are happy for them to be the lead author. This discussion will help to sow the seeds for a good working relationship.

When I found out it was going to be co-authored I had no issue as I understood the dissertation would need adapting and tweaking to be appropriate for submission (Daniel Brookes, personal communication, 2016).

Once the ground rules have been laid down, be prepared to put in some time, effort and patience. This could be time to do a complete rewrite or to give feedback on repeated drafts. It will take longer than you think as I soon realised when I began preparing Daniel’s 6,000 word dissertation (not including references) for a 5,000 word paper (including references). Not only did I have to cut down the word count but I had to develop the gaps in the literature and missed opportunities in the analysis. Fortunately at Sheffield Hallam University our BA Journalism dissertation module is only 20 credits so the word count is limited to 6,000 but at many institutions they can reach 10,000 words and beyond. Be aware then that most communications journals ask for around 6,000 to 8,000 words and you may have to slice 2,000 words or more which is harder than it sounds. Then there is the ethics procedure to consider which will vary between universities. All of our dissertation students have to fill out an ethics form to complete the module so this was already in hand to cover the data collection. The publication itself went through the standard university ethics committee procedure which was straight forward given that there were no human participants.

Communication is key throughout all of these processes as students who are used to quick turnaround journalism deadlines will not realise how agonisingly slow the academic publication procedure is. Daniel started his dissertation in September 2013 and the paper was not published until May 2016 - almost three years later. In the interim Daniel graduated and got his first job, I had a second child and the paper was presented by my colleague at the Future of Journalism conference. But although it is a slow journey, this doesn’t mean students can’t put the pending publication on their curriculum vitae or website as this is the norm for academics. Students should also be made aware that the final article may look very different from their original dissertation, especially if their supervisor is rewriting it. It is important to communicate that this is not a poor reflection of their original assignment but it is about portraying information in a particular academic style. When I co-authored my paper with Daniel, we discussed how this would work and he was more than happy for me to rewrite his dissertation and for him to comment on drafts. Although the final article was quite distinct from his dissertation, he remained “very happy” with it as it “still maintained the original feel and tone” of his original assessment (Daniel Brookes, personal communication, 2016).

End result

The whole process has been a learning curve for me but one that I would definitely repeat. I am extremely pleased with the finished article and the publication we secured. What started out as a little experiment turned into a REF-able output and a great achievement for Daniel.

I have added it to my CV and my LinkedIn profile and it can only help validate my work experience and university experience listed on my CV. My advice to other students is that if you're offered the same choice, go for it. You have nothing to lose and you never know, it could help you to land a job or get that freelance gig assessment (Daniel Brookes, personal communication, 2016).

In all honesty the process was slower and more time consuming than I imagined and the rewriting took much longer than I had anticipated or scheduled. But the end result was worth the effort as it gave Daniel a new opportunity and enabled me to build up my research portfolio in local journalism and social media without having to crunch the data myself. I already have a keen eye out for potential students to work with in 2017.

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