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Enhancing students' employability skills via production
and content**

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Podcasting as a multifaceted teaching and learning tool: Enhancing students' employability skills via production and content

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Introduction

This essay describes a project designed to provide a work experience opportunity for undergraduate and postgraduate journalism students while creating a learning resource on freelancing.

In the UK the 2018 Office for National Statistics Trends in Self Employment survey showed that 35% of journalists were self-employed, more than double the 15% rate seen across all sectors (ONS, 2018). A report on freelance journalism from the National Council for the Training of Journalists (NCTJ) in 2016 found that between 2000 and 2015, the numbers of freelance journalists increased from 15,000 to 25,000 – a 67% rise (Spilsbury, 2016). The report also found that it is more common for journalists to be pulled into self-employment for aspirational reasons rather than to be pushed into turning freelance. Data from the Journalists at Work surveys carried out periodically by the NCTJ found that since 2002 the proportion of journalists whose first job was a freelancer, has roughly doubled from a starting point of 5% (Spilsbury, 2013). This has likely increased since this time and will have been heightened by pandemic.

In 2018 we researched the teaching of freelance skills within UK university journalism degrees, which we presented at the World Journalism Education Congress in 2019 and the Association for Journalism Education conference in 2018. We found that while more journalists – through necessity or choice – are working as freelancers, there is little training within Further or Higher Education journalism courses on freelancing. Our survey of undergraduate and postgraduate journalism students in the UK who graduated in the past five years, found that two thirds had received no training on freelancing, and 90% wanted to be taught more about freelance work as part of their studies.

As we completed our book *Freelancing for Journalists* (Canter and Wilkinson, 2020) our thoughts turned to what resources we could create to provide information and guidance on freelancing that could be easily incorporated into existing modules on our undergraduate and postgraduate courses. Our plan was for a learning tool that would engage students in the topic while at the same time providing work experience opportunities.

Project proposal

Our proposal was to produce a unique podcast series on freelancing in collaboration with postgraduate and undergraduate journalism students. It was envisaged as a cross between BBC Radio 4 The Media Show and popular millennial podcast Wanna Be. We applied for a Teaching Enhancement Grant with the aim that the podcast would be planned, produced and edited by a team of 25 students on a rota basis with supervision from Broadcast Journalism Lecturer Richard Wilson. It was proposed that each student would gain 10 hours work experience from the project.

As part of the grant application, we planned for six episodes to be presented by ourselves as experienced freelance journalists. Each episode had a different theme with two guests invited to provide their expertise and discuss their experience. It was important to us and a key part of our application that the guests were from diverse backgrounds and that we could pay them for their time.

Once completed, our goal was to make the series available via Blackboard to students on core BA Journalism Level 6 module Digital Journalism and core MA Multimedia Journalism, MA Sports Journalism and MA International Journalism Level 7 module Online Journalism. In addition, each episode would also be released on a podcasting platform to the public and promoted via social media in order to raise the profile of the university and its journalism courses. Editorial control would remain with Lily Canter and Richard Wilson ensuring no legal or reputational risks.

There were three key objectives:

- To engage Level 5, 6 and 7 students in an outward facing activity with a potentially global audience to enhance their employability skills, gain work experience and enable them to network with industry professionals on a one-to-one basis
- To create a permanent online learning resource for students on core employability-focused Level 6 and Level 7 modules and respond to the recommendation in the BA Journalism revalidation to include more freelance journalism content in the curriculum
- To showcase BA and MA journalism courses at Sheffield Hallam University and the expertise of its staff

Getting started

We were successful in our grant application and were awarded £700 for the project. In order to share the podcast outside the university, we found a local podcast platform called Captivate.fm and it was agreed that the Media Arts and Communications department would buy an institutional package. This meant the platform could also be used by students producing podcasts for the Level 5 Podcasting and Radio Documentaries module as well as other staff members.

We recruited interested students from Level 5 with a smaller number from Level 6 and Level 7 postgraduate courses. After interviews to further explain the goals of the project and ascertain willingness to participate, we selected 10 students to take part. Roles were allocated based on the student's interest and skills. These included: guest liaison manager, desk driver, programme editor, studio producer, music researcher, art designer, website designer, and social media manager.

Recording of the podcast was to be done in the department radio studio. It was decided that staff would find and book the guests and to ensure we were able to pay them within our budget we looked for freelance journalists living in, or fairly near to, Sheffield where travel expenses would be minimal. We also wanted to highlight to our students those working in journalism careers outside London.

The planned episode topics were: Where is the freelance work; pitching and providing the goods; contacts and networking; finances and getting paid; law, rights and ethics; and branding and supplementary income streams.

Recording the podcast

We began by recording a pilot episode with two lecturers within the department who both had extensive freelance experience. This enabled the students to gain experience of their roles as well as allowing us to iron out any technical problems and try out the episode format we had developed prior to inviting external guests to take part.

Episodes were recorded in one take with music added on the beginning and end in post production. Once the project was underway some students were able to take on greater responsibility in their allocated roles. On one occasion when recording an episode, a student had to be directed over the phone on how to patch in a phone call to the radio studio for a guest being interviewed remotely. It proved to be excellent on the job training. Another took sole responsibility for researching and creating the show notes.

We recorded five episodes and the pilot before the coronavirus pandemic hit in March 2019. One guest had to cancel because they had symptoms of Covid-19 and were isolating. Our final recording in the radio studio was managed by one student who had made it in the week before lockdown. Our final episode was recorded on Zoom.

Overall students were involved in researching the music, liaising with guests, taking photographs, producing show notes, writing episode descriptions and driving the desk during the recording of episodes. Due to lockdown staff had to take on some of the roles originally planned for students such as promotion and website management. We also recorded three bonus coronavirus episodes in reaction to the rapidly changing situation. These were released prior to the full series. We also decided to substitute the law, rights and ethics episode with our pilot episode recorded with staff members, due to the pandemic shutting down the radio studio suddenly and our first Zoom recording having technical difficulties. However, once we mastered Zoom we were able to proceed with further series of the podcast online.

Student benefits

The impact on student participants was multifaceted as they received active, passive and tangible benefits. By taking part in the different aspects of producing a podcast series they received hands-on work experience. This involved working in pre-production sourcing music, liaising with guests and taking photos as well as live production work such as driving the studio desk and managing a phone in. There were also post production tasks such as writing show notes and producing episode descriptors.

During one recording Richard Wilson, the staff member responsible for producing the show, was unable to attend due to coronavirus-related issues. Since one of the guests had travelled to Sheffield specifically to record the show we had to continue with the recording. Second year BA Journalism student Ben Dodd stepped in and took control of the recording, driving the desk in the radio studio and co-ordinating a phone in.

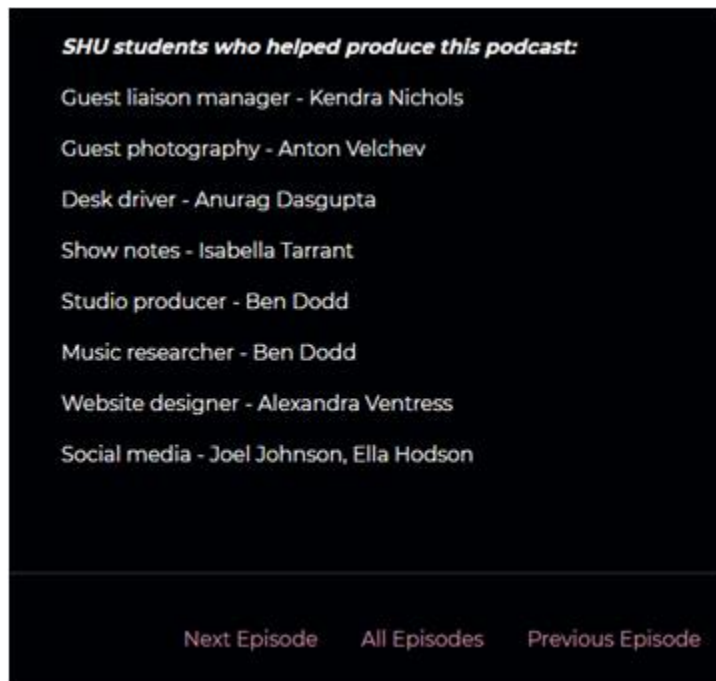
Giving feedback on the hands-on experience Ben reflected on how he enjoyed rising to the challenge.

I really enjoyed it, and found it really useful. Especially the day where Richard (staff member) wasn't there and I had to figure out the phone in software, it was great experience and I enjoyed learning on the job. (Ben Dodd, personal communication, February 2 2021)

For third-year BA Journalism student Kendra Nix simply being in the radio studio and observing the operations was a valuable experience.

I didn't really have previous experience with podcasting so it was interesting to be behind the scenes and see the ins and outs of how things worked. Lily and Emma bounced off each other so well and were very engaging and made the podcasts and behind the scenes fun. Working with Richard on the sound board was also really interesting as it correlated back to the radio module I was taking at the time. (Kendra Nix, personal communication, February 8 2021)

By taking part in the production of a real-world artefact, students were able to have something tangible to list on their CV. One student contacted Emma Wilkinson directly to ask how to reference the work experience on their CV. We were able to list the names of all of the students in the show notes of each relevant podcast episode which they could then hyperlink to in their CV.



We also used Twitter to promote the involvement of students including their usernames so they had further evidence of their involvement in the project.



In their feedback both Ben Dodd and Kendra Nix confirmed that they linked to the podcast in their CVs, with Ben remarking: “I definitely do use it on my CV, it’s useful to be linked to a property that’s known by a lot of people in the industry and has had a lot of journalists on as guests.”

Although the active hands-on experience was limited to a small number of students the resultant podcast series enabled a much larger body of students within Sheffield Hallam University and beyond, to passively learn about freelance journalism.

The episodes were embedded onto core Level 6 and 7 modules on Blackboard and also made widely available via podcasting directories including Spotify, Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts. The global reach of the podcast is demonstrated in the metrics which show it has been listened to in 93 countries and received more than 12,500 downloads. The second biggest audience outside the UK is India, followed by the USA.

Personal and pedagogical lessons

As well as equipping students with podcasting work experience and advice on freelancing we also learnt many personal and pedagogical lessons from this project. Initially the most fundamental lesson was that we learnt how to launch, develop, promote and maintain a popular podcast series and the ingredients required in order to do this.

Without any prior knowledge in broadcast journalism, we were able to learn everything via our own first-hand experience from scriptwriting to recording to editing. But perhaps more importantly we learnt a huge amount about podcast branding, marketing and monetisation. The podcast is now in its fourth series having continued beyond the initial grant-funded project which created series 1. We managed to secure a sponsor for series 3 and series 4 of the podcast enabling us to produce the podcast outside of university hours (we are both part-time) and to continue paying our freelance guests.

Due to the pandemic we switched to online recording from series 2 and we intend to continue this indefinitely. This has widened the diversity of our podcast guests and we have been able to record with freelance journalists not just from all across the UK but also from America, New Zealand and Germany.

This experience has been invaluable in informing our own teaching practice particularly during the pandemic. We are now equipped with the skills and knowledge to teach podcasting online using tools such as Zencast, Cleanfeed and Zoom, and Lily Canter has also modified her podcasting module at Sheffield Hallam University to incorporate a business plan so students have entrepreneurial skills beyond just recording and editing. Emphasis is placed on branding and marketing to reflect the podcasting industry which is populated with hundreds of thousands of independent self-starters. This also complements our work on integrating more freelancing and entrepreneurial skills into the curriculum of which income generation is hugely significant.

The skills we have gained are also transferrable to other practical and academic modules and we have been approached by colleagues in journalism and media to develop further podcasting modules or to support the integration of podcasting as an assessment method. We are beginning a skills exchange to encourage lecturers to create podcast series around research topics and we are also supporting students who wish to set up their own podcast series outside of our dedicated BA Journalism/BA Sports Journalism podcasting module.

The biggest lesson we have both learnt through this whole process is how impactful branding can lead a project to take on a life of its own. Initially we set out to produce six podcast episodes largely as a learning resource. At the time of writing, we have released 25 episodes including two dualcast collaborations and are planning a further 18 episodes planned for 2021. Freelancing for Journalists is now a widely recognised brand and is considered to be the leading provider of educational resources on freelance journalism in the UK. This all occurred extremely rapidly and completely accidentally.

By commissioning a graphic designer to create the artwork for our podcast series we inadvertently created a brand. Within two months of the release of the podcast in March 2020 we were asked to run a four-week freelance training course for journalism.co.uk. We also received widespread coverage in the trade press and were invited to give numerous talks at universities. It was at this point that we realised we were no longer Lily Canter and Emma Wilkinson, freelance journalists and lecturers, but we were a brand. Together we were Freelancing for Journalists. Upon this realisation we decided to act quickly and start our own webinar training programme, remote work experience initiative and newsletter. Around the same time the Facebook group we had set up in March to promote the podcast was taking off and becoming a hub of conversation and advice sharing for freelance journalists in the UK and globally. To date the Facebook community has more than 3,200 members, with 420 posts a month on average.

What started as a pilot podcast project within the university has turned into an external small business which currently generates around 25% of our freelance income and continues to grow. We have hired a part-time research assistant and finally feel we are in a position to provide valuable, practical and up-to-date advice and support on freelancing which has been missing from much of journalism training and education. Through this process we have learnt about digital marketing, online event management, business partnerships, collaboration and sponsorship which will inform our teaching going forward.

Reflections

As our graduates enter an extremely volatile job market it has never been more important to imbue them with entrepreneurial skills and the ability to create a sustainable and autonomous portfolio career.

This could be through a range of skills such as podcasting, newsletter writing, freelance writing, freelance producing and/or copywriting.

There is a demand from students for podcasting skills and we have seen a surge in graduates launching excellent journalism podcasts such as JobsBored, Northern Natter and Views Our Own. As our world has shifted almost entirely online we need to recognise the need to teach podcasting outside of radio studios and equip students with online recording and editing skills. Alongside this there is a need to approach work experience in innovative ways and enable remote opportunities such as shadowing freelance journalists rather than the traditional approach of being a 'workie' in a newsroom.

Whether it is through freelance knowledge, podcasting skills or other entrepreneurial teaching we need to ensure that we equip our students with the tools, confidence and belief that career opportunities are limitless.

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