



FLEXIBLE TRAINING MODELS: A RESPONSE TO THE CURRENT NEEDS

THE CATALAN NEWS AGENCY: A UNIQUE PROFESSIONAL TRAINING MODEL IN JOURNALISM TEACHING

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1. **ABSTRACT:** In 2010 the Universitat Pompeu Fabra –a public university in the heart of Barcelona- embarked on a unique joint venture in the field of journalism training in conjunction with the Agència Catalana de Notícies, the Catalan government news agency. The idea behind the project was to offer an English-language wire service aimed mainly at foreign correspondents, investors and policymakers which would take a look at current events from a specifically Catalan standpoint. This paper analyses the first four years of the Catalan News Agency experiment from an educational, professional and journalism perspective.
2. **RESUMEN:** En el año 2010 la Universidad Pompeu Fabra –universidad pública emplazada en el corazón de Barcelona- se embarcó en una innovadora iniciativa de formación en periodismo con la Agència Catalana de Notícies, la agencia oficial del Gobierno catalán. El proyecto pretendía ofrecer un servicio de noticias en inglés dirigido principalmente a corresponsales extranjeros, inversores y legisladores, quienes dispondrían de una aproximación a los hechos noticiosos desde un punto de vista específicamente catalán. Esta comunicación analiza estos cuatro años de trabajo



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conjunto con la *Catalan News Agency* desde un punto de vista educativo, profesional y periodístico.

3. KEYWORDS: Journalism, News Agency, Training, Task-based learning, English./

PALABRAS-CLAVE: Periodismo, Agencia de Noticias, Formación, Aprendizaje basado en tareas, Inglés

4. DEVELOPMENT:

a) Objectives

The UPF-Catalan News Agency learning methodology itself has three main objectives: i) to allow students to understand and follow the criteria and professional newsroom dynamics of a news agency ii) to cover local events from a specific and non-centralist perspective thus offering alternative news sources to interested users and iii) to produce such quality news content in the English language, an additional challenge when taking into account this will not be the native tongue of neither the journalist nor reader.

These three goals are supported by two main theoretical frameworks. The first refers to current trends on news production and supply and the training of students for a new and changing labour market. The second is in line with the newest learning methods based on simulations, technology, multi-task and task-based learning combined in this case with the extra challenge of working in a foreign (in this case, English) language.

Theoretical frameworks describing the dynamics of news agencies worldwide show that, after decades of news agencies going global, the value of a local approach is increasing in today's world. As Muro pointed out "the open regionalism imposed by globalization requires 'viable, regional networks... to increase news flows', an objective set by UNESCO in the 1980's. The ability to connect as closely as possible with one's neighbour is the way towards building a regional collective consciousness as an additional stage in the building of a global perspective" (Muro, 2010: 160). On the one hand, agencies go global by establishing subsidiary services in "other" countries or regions (e.g. the German DPA has



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Spanish and Arabic services) or by joining forces with other agencies based in other countries and regions in order to share news (e.g. the Associated Press agreement with the Canadian CP).

On the other hand, we can witness how local agencies are emerging in many small countries or regions of the world thanks to two recent phenomena. Firstly, the technological revolution based on network tasks, 24 hours instant communication, inexpensive and easy-to-use gadgets, big data, ubiquity, etc. Secondly, the consolidation of English as a worldwide *lingua franca*. Those two phenomena have affected all human organizations, institutions or companies in the world, and have brought new tendencies in news selection, production and consumption. While the already global news agencies have gone through a serious crisis (Varela, 2009) and have had to adapt to new working routines towards a more efficient business model, smaller local agencies have already been born within this business framework. Therefore, journalism as a whole has changed and so have journalists' roles, competences, capacities and formation. Concepts such as the "orchestra journalist" or "back pack journalist" (Salaverría and Negrodo, 2008; Blom and Davenport, 2012) are used to describe the new role of journalists. Many authors have studied the way newsrooms work at the moment (Salaverría and Negrodo, 2008; Masip, 2008) determined by issues such as convergence journalism (Kolodzy, 2006; Salaverría, García Avilés and Masip, 2010), user-generated-data or the active audience (Deuze, 2009; Da Rocha, 2013), business convergence (Masip and Micó, 2009), and the use of online information (Masip, 2003b).

In parallel fashion, universities are trying to adapt themselves to these new requirements of the market (Castañeda, Murphy and Hether, 2005). Although there has been some disagreement about how to address this new reality at a Faculty level (Blom and Davenport, 2012) from the early years of the Internet one could see how the news world was about to change (Masip, 2003a; Masip, 2005) inasmuch as the world and the university itself were (and still are) changing. There is strong pressure on the university to make a contribution to both the economy and the labour market and the Universitat Pompeu Fabra has tried to respond to this pressure with an innovative "integrated journalism" project. Inspired on



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learning models from Columbia Journalism School or the Engineering in the University of Stanford (EUA), this system brings together the four branches of current and future journalism (Da Rocha, Narberhaus and Alsius, 2012; Ramon, 2013):

- 1) Media integration.
- 2) Professional simulations.
- 3) University-business connections.
- 4) Internationalization.

The “Cetrencada” experience (Da Rocha and Ramon, 2012) has focused on the integration of the different media and the capacities needed to carry this through. Different professional institutions are associated with this macroproject (local television channel, local newspaper, radio station, news website and a news agency) enabling students to contribute content which will be published in real life. With reference to the project at hand here, the Catalan News Agency course is based on the production of materials in English from a Catalan perspective and directed at the rest of the world. This kind of a spin-off subject perfectly meets the four criteria previously set out. What is more, it cannot be of greater relevance considering today’s political situation in Catalonia: “Any region that intends to grow as an active political centre must ensure that the news ties between the different areas that make up the region are effective” (Muro, 2010: 160). This crystallizes in stories that deal with both local events regarding Catalan politics -and also sports, culture, tourism, economy..., and global events from a Catalan view (Nogué, 2010).

The future of news stories is linked to nations and societies (the nation-state), the “glocal” phenomenon (local and global dichotomy), news technologies, and the use of English as a lingua franca. However, English as a lingua franca does not just mean the wholesale adoption of terminology regardless of its origin. Sensitive use should be made when dealing with the coverage of political realities of nations with their own history, institutions and idiosyncrasy as a whole. Precisely, the much heralded task-based learning model for language learning is naturally present in the model exposed here. In conclusion, the features



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of this new journalism model in general and news agencies in particular are key for any institution to succeed in the news market. Unfortunately, most universities in Spain have not yet applied these precepts in their curricula (Da Rocha, Tulloch and Fernández, 2014).

With these coordinates mapped out, we can now proceed to outline the main features of a model which is simultaneously local and global, which necessarily requires both a multimedia and integrated platform and which represents a direct collaboration between the university teaching environment and professional praxis. A complementary goal here will be to present the model of the training process applied in the classroom which enables university students to report current events to a global on-line audience from a publicly-funded professional platform such as the Catalan News Agency.

b) Description of my work

The professional training experience presented here is the result of the challenges that news agencies face nowadays. Journalism in the digital era is totally dependent on the integrated management of technological skills and the universal applicability of these resources has made news stories and their scope both local and global in a non-contradictory manner. The challenge for the Catalan News Agency and its team of student reporters is precisely to adjust this local perspective to a global outlook given that news agencies have a social role and contribute in significant fashion to the portrayal of the image of a national identity. In this sense, the CNA project aims to offer an alternative to the centralist EFE-style perspective from Madrid. All this is put together in a joint venture form between the agency and the university and offers a win-win scenario. The CNA benefits by disposing of a multilingual international team of “interns” and the Universitat Pompeu Fabra can add a news agency to its wider integrated journalism project which includes the collaboration of local media in the field of newspapers, television, radio and internet.

Methodological design from an educational point of view



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In order to offer empirical findings, a clarification of the methodological design from an educational point of view is necessary to understand both the didactic model behind the project as well as the specific roles played by teachers, journalists and students. The Catalan News Agency course at the UPF begins before entering the classroom as students are filtered according to i) their course status (only third and fourth year students are eligible) ii) language skills given that the class is taught by teacher and journalist alike exclusively in English and iii) class quota. The experience of the last four years has shown that given the newsroom hands-on approach of the course only 15-20 students may enrol. Larger numbers lead to coordination and work distribution difficulties. As for the profile of the group, course lecturers try to maintain a balance between local and international students to allow for greater interaction as regards news stories and sources and to maintain an English-speaking working atmosphere.

In the very first class students are encouraged to introduce themselves to their class colleagues, to explain their journalistic and academic background and to suggest the field in which they would like to work. In broad terms, the CNA offers six categories for specialization: Politics, Business, Society, Lifestyle, Culture and Sports. Local students tend to opt for Politics, Business and Society issues whereas international students, given the obvious difficulty of being able to grasp the intricacies of local political and economical issues, tend to choose “lighter” stories in the fields of Lifestyle, Culture and Sports. The UPF course lecturer and the Editor of the CNA also explain their double presence and respective roles in the classroom.

Once the student newsroom staff are assembled, additional logistical and course grading issues are outlined such as the amount of work expected from the student, the structure of the weekly editorial meetings and the division that the course instructors make between three types of texts:

- i) the linguistic adaptation of newswires from Catalan to English;



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- ii) the reworking, greater contextualization and introduction of additional sources to news stories already published on the Catalan language website
- iii) the production of original feature stories which are explained and developed in weekly editorial meeting with teaching staff and the Editor of the Agency. At the editorial meetings, minutes are taken, work is distributed, calendar questions are discussed, production problems are aired, press accreditation for events are processed, technical equipment reserved (cameras for example) and feature stories proposed. Published online news stories are shown to the students and the justifications by staff for not publishing stories are also offered allowing students to understand where mistakes were made with the goal of improving their future contributions to the website. Individual files are opened on each student to make sure these improvements are made.

After the organizational issues are covered, the UPF-CNA production model *estRICTU SENSU* follows the following pattern. First of all, students choose the news story and develop it following one of the three article modalities explained above. At this moment guidelines regarding the compatibility of content for the agency website are given. Students are encouraged to carefully select events and to use both general newsworthy criteria and the specific interests of the agency which is none other than that of offering a newsworthy global news stories from a specifically Catalan perspective. The focus and pitch of the news story is a key issue here and, depending on the story, the teaching experience may simultaneously involve both journalistic instruction as well as offering a wider political or ideological framework to the story, particularly in the case of international students. Classic journalistic themes such as objectivity and framing are incorporated from an operative perspective and students are made aware of the flexibility in which journalism theory is applied. An agency style guide assists students through terminological minefields (Catalonia= region? country? territory?) and students are encouraged to include explanatory phraseology regarding specifically Catalan traditions such as *correbous* or *la Patum* with no easy linguistic equivalent in English.



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Once the choice of story is made and the focus agreed upon, the student faces the challenge of producing the news in the English language which is of course a foreign language to both local Catalan students as well as the vast majority of international (“Erasmus”) students. By producing English-language content, the CNA project not only forces the students to face specific language challenges such as headlining or the translation of delicate terminology (redefining political vocabulary for example) but also obliges trainee journalists to attend a non-local audience in line with agency guidelines in a language which proves neither to be the *lingua franca* of the territory from where the news story is datelined, of the journalist responsible for it and, which may not be the native language of the readership.

The texts are then printed and sent to the course instructor (who is in this case an English language graduate) for correction on paper. The decision was made not to correct texts directly online so that students could observe in greater detail the mistakes they may have incurred so as not to make them in the future. The texts are returned to the student in class who then corrects them and sends them to the Agency Editor along with accompanying photographs. On reception at the Agency the texts are double-checked for any factual errors and the most interesting and well-written stories are posted on the website. The student can consult his or her work on line, make a photo capture of the screen and begin to assemble a CNA professional portfolio. Current publication rates range between 30-40% of all texts. The course is taught throughout two trimesters from January to March and from April through to June meaning that the UPF students contribute English language news stories to the Agency for six months per calendar year.

c) Results and/or conclusions

Preliminary findings of a joint venture which has involved the production of professional quality English language news content for a publicly-funded governmental news outlet such as the Catalan News Agency from the university classroom have been wide-ranging in scope:



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- At a corporate and institutional level, students have come to terms with the specific demands and characteristics of a national news agency which includes not only the business model of a wire service as information wholesaler but also its distribution networks and the interests and geographical profile of its subscribers.
- At a technological and innovative level, this project has allowed both educators and students alike to attend the need for multimedia-skilled journalists able to work in an integrated media environment.
- At a journalistic level, students have shown themselves to be able to greater cater to a public with informative needs which go beyond a centralist perspective. In this sense the student's understanding of the necessary compatibility between content and the media platform progresses as the course advances and can be evidenced by comparing texts from week one and week ten of the course.
- At a linguistic level, students learn not only the ins and outs of journalistic English (headlines, use of present tense for past etc.) but also how to adjust their vocabulary to the editorial guide lines of a news agency (the absence of adjectives for example) and also how to pitch their stories in "CNA English".
- At an organizational and professional level, teaching staff have been able to observe how students are forced to abandon traditional simulation scenarios and are faced with real editorial meetings with staff from the CNA where ideas are discussed, plans are made, tasks are shared out and where students must learn to manage their joint condition as "student" and "journalist" when acting in the name of the news agency.

The journalism training experiment that is the Catalan News Agency project offers an integrated learning experience which responds to the simultaneously global and local media environment in which journalists operate. An awareness of corporate responsibility as a publicly funded news operation, a sensitive approach to the need for greater international communication of a specific territory, the use of technological innovations and a



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multilingual newsroom are just some of the elements which contribute to making this flexible model perfectly suited to attending current news dynamics.

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