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Building reflexive practitioners

Engaging UG journalism students with teaching of research methods

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Every tutor on research methods module...

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Every student on research methods module...

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Background

- Teaching academic research methods to undergraduate students in an engaging and relevant manner is a challenge even to the most experienced lecturer (Lewthwaite and Nind, 2016; Roberts, 2016)
- Many beginner research methods students either lack interest and motivation to learn a subject that they feel is not relevant to them, feel anxious or nervous about research methods courses and have a poor attitude towards research (Earley, 2014)
- Massive challenge is to show students how acquiring good academic research skills will be valuable in their journalism, media and communication careers. For example, thanks to academic research skills students will gain the experience and confidence to pitch ideas for news stories
- Our team's teaching experience shows that journalism students find it difficult to comprehend the difference between journalistic and academic investigation
- So why bother teaching research methods?

> With the football World Cup under way in Russia, it's sausages that are preoccupying one group of researchers, not soccer. They want to know how many sausages are eaten at the matches and what the resulting impact on the climate will be.

Pedagogical approach

- Active learning – engages students in all aspects of the research process and highlights the links between theory and practice
- Learning by doing – gaining experience of conducting research through own projects (individually or in a group) using different research tools (including digital)
- Critical reflection – encouraging critical reflection on research practice (Kilburn et al., 2014; Lewthwaite and Nind, 2016)

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Research methods

- Perspectives include using psychological and sociological research methods to develop holistic perspectives to bridge gaps in how students engage with research methods (Lester & Harris, 2014)
- This can be accomplished through a combination of intersectionality, queer theory, or critical race theory: Lester and Harris' research showed that students considered race, gender, ethnicity, and social class when making sense of classroom experiences
- Quality assurance considerations need to be considered when attempting to understand student engagement (Coates, 2005)

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J-School ethnographies

Hermann (2017) argues

- Student engagement with academia tends to be a philosophical examination or for information only
- Hermann advocates using social science as a tool box to bridge journalism and academia
- Ethnographic research is advocated because it closely resembles practical journalism, however, ethical and epsitemic perspectives differ between journalism and ethnography
- One of the key perspectives is to understand that narrative journalism can benefit from an understanding of ethnographic methods

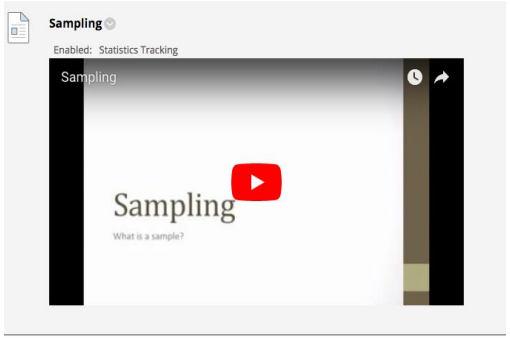
The Project

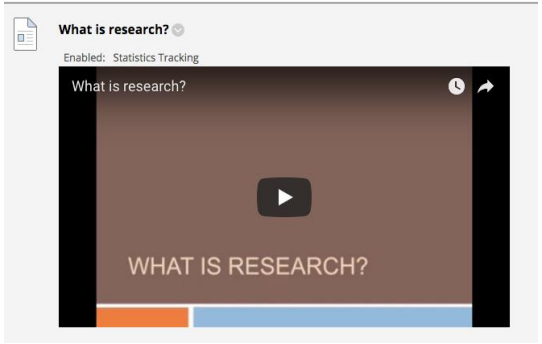
- *Research question:* how to teach research methods to journalism students in an engaging and relevant way?
- Aims:

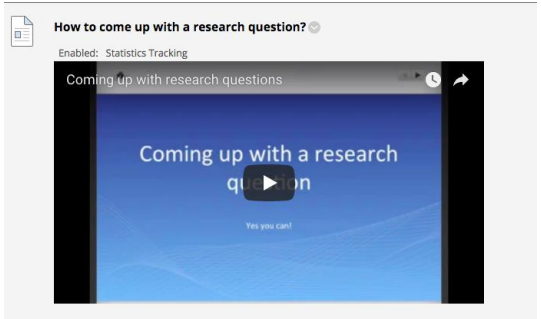
1. To develop a robust and user-friendly framework for engaging students with a variety of methods that they normally tend to avoid, e.g. quantitative content analysis or discourse analysis
2. To take this framework into the classroom and test it while engaging students in technology enhanced learning

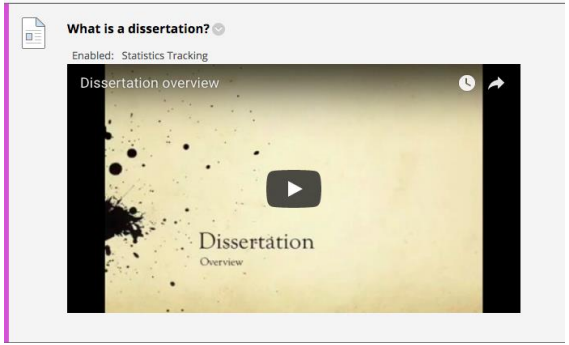
What I did

- “Blended learning” approach – combining face-to-face teaching and using digital technology to enhance engagement
- Created a bank of short screencasts

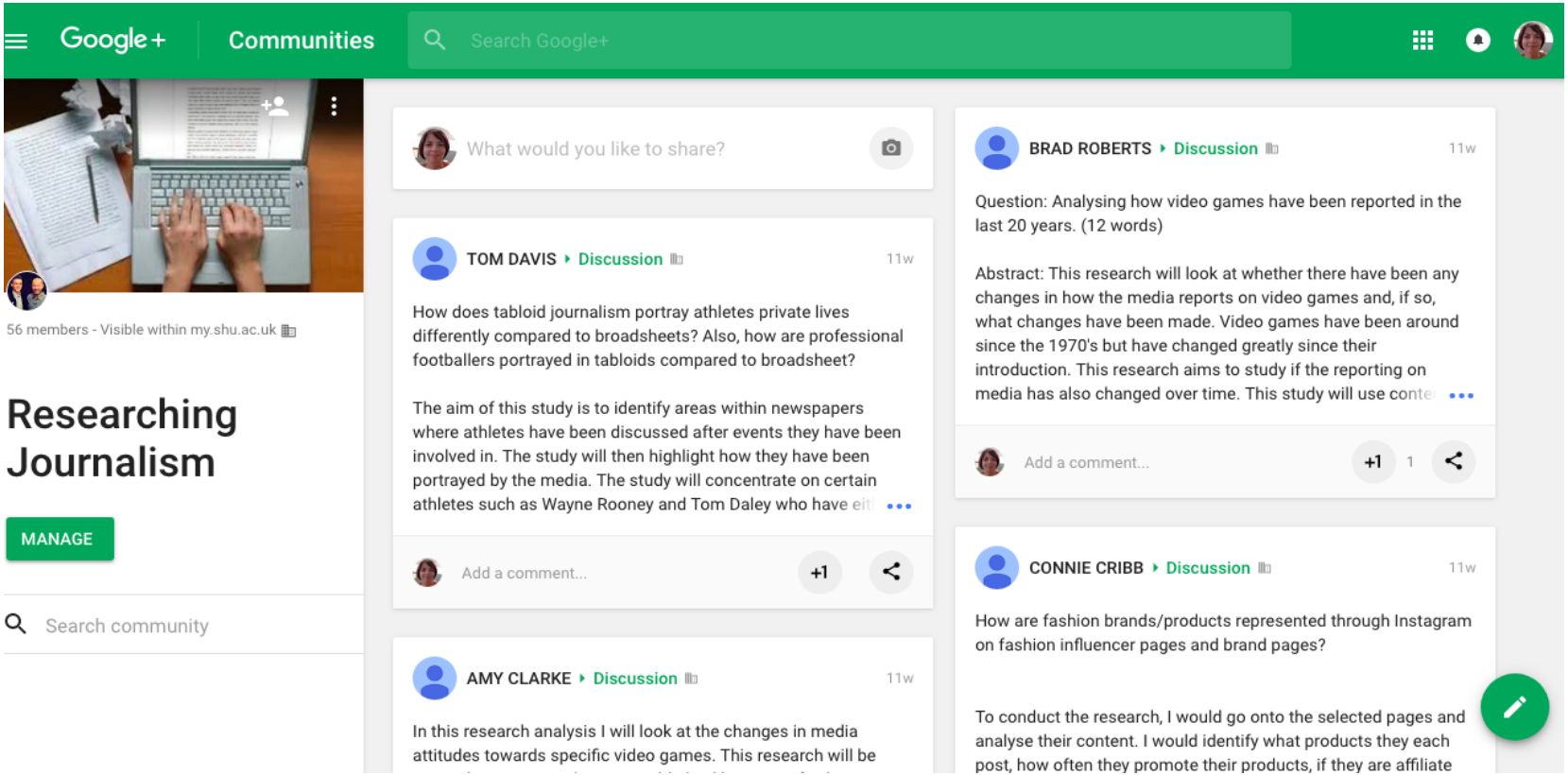




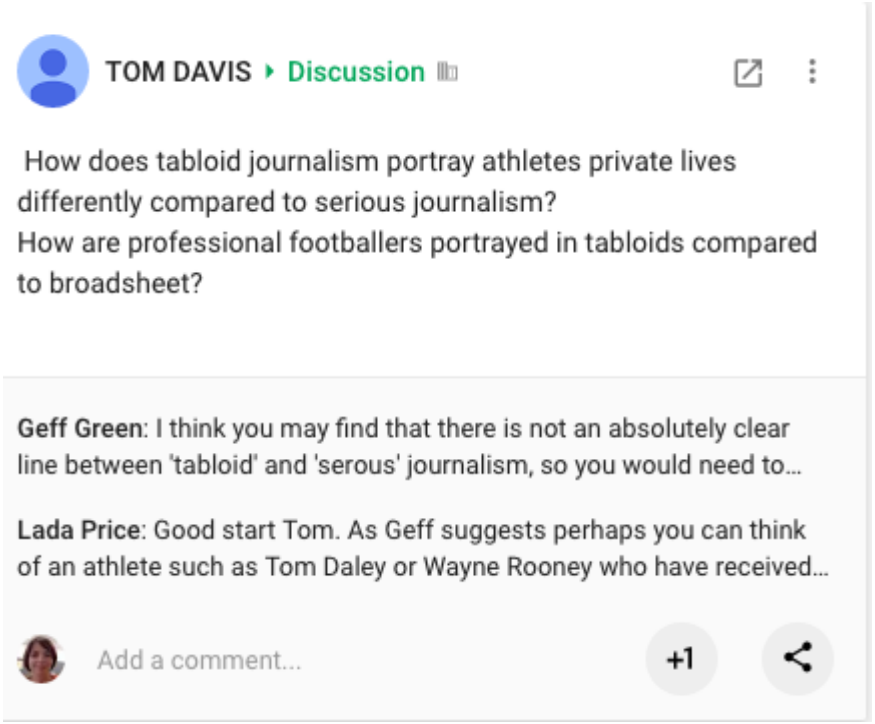


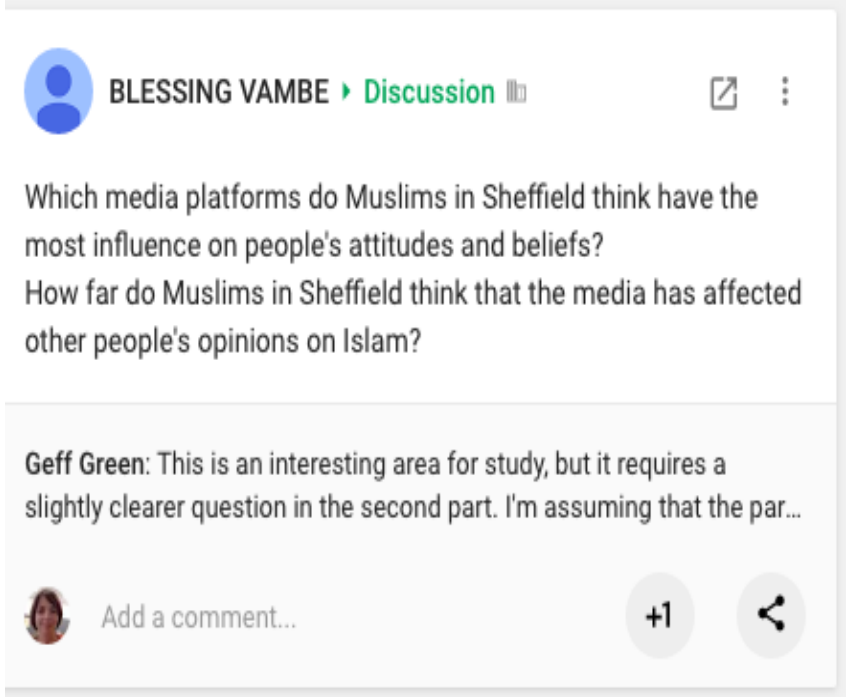


Google+ community



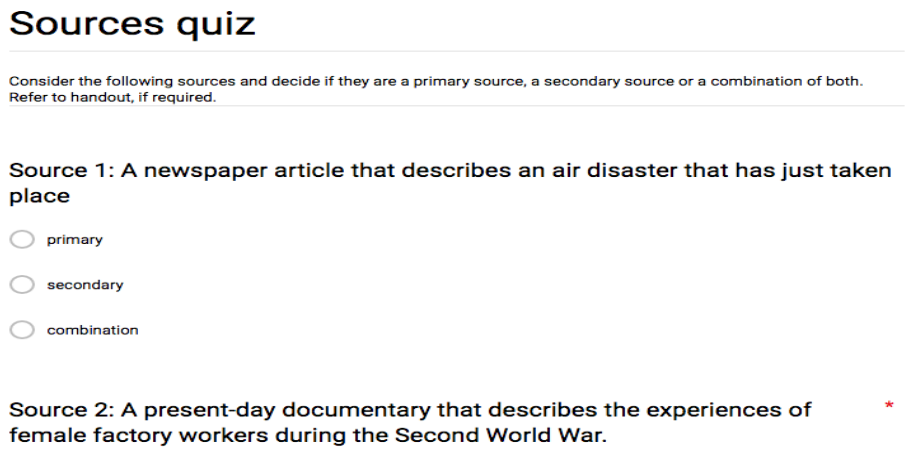
Interaction and conversation about Research





Other tools

- Padlet
- Textalyser for CA
- Twitter
- TAGS
- Shared google docs/forms and online quizzes
- Library sessions to teach how to search for academic literature (e.g. Scopus) and how to use Proquest and Nexis databases
- Student guest talks and Q&A
- Traditional tools - post-it notes, paper handouts, props and getting out of the classroom to observe!



Sources quiz

Consider the following sources and decide if they are a primary source, a secondary source or a combination of both. Refer to handout, if required.

Source 1: A newspaper article that describes an air disaster that has just taken place

- primary
- secondary
- combination

Source 2: A present-day documentary that describes the experiences of female factory workers during the Second World War. *

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Observation

- Over the course of a semester, I spent 16 hours observing three, 2-hour tutorial groups
- Students had a general lecture as a large group and were then divided into three smaller groups that met once a week for roundtable discussions and to apply research methods
- My role was as a non-participant observer
- Students tended to engage well for the first hour and began to lose focus
- When it came time for students to talk about what they had found from the various exercises, their classmates tended not to pay attention and hold their own conversations

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Observations

- From a gender perspective, male students tended to lose focus quicker than female students and female students tended to help each other during exercises
- When lecturers altered the classroom slightly while students were out doing an assignment, students tended to think something was different in the room when they returned without any prompting
- There was a tendency among students to disengage when a general question was asked. That is, they preferred to “hide” when a question was asked
- Of the entire class (all three groups combined) only one or two seemed to truly engage with learning research methods

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Survey

Survey findings:

- The majority of students had no prior experience with research methods, but almost half found that the module helped them to narrow the scope of dissertation research to one or two potential method types while half stated they found the module very helpful
- About half of the students think this module would help them become more critical journalists

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Student feedback

- *‘The beginning was fairly complex and threw people off at times. Breaks in between what we had learned and to make sure it was fully understood would have been useful’*
- *‘I have a much deeper understanding of research methods as well as what makes research successful. I feel much more confident in my ability to conduct my own research if needed, which in turn makes me feel more confident as a journalist’*
- *“This module definitely spiked my interest a lot more in academic research as opposed to simply working as a journalist. It even made me consider looking at academic research roles after graduation”*

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Student survey data

In terms of specific points of reference:

- Ethnography: Half found the ethnographic exercise to help understand traditional research methods, while less than half felt they were invading people's privacy doing observation at a distance;
- Research methods: Half said they felt either sufficient or more than sufficient time was allocated for content/discourse analysis, conducting interviews, designing surveys, and writing peer reviews
- Observational data showed that after these types of events, students were engaged and spoke enthusiastically about what they had done.

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Conclusions

- Investment in time and effort
- Students enjoyed the module on many levels but were reluctant to commit to take part in a in-depth discussion about their learning experience
- More focus on assessment, passing the module and getting a good mark Many still struggling to see link between theory and practice
- Trial and error - more changes planned for next year, taking stock of what worked and what didn’t. More focus on reflection though a blog post
- Journalism industry needs to lend some extra support to our efforts in educating critical thinking journalism practitioners
- It was as challenging as I expected. The quest goes on!