

3CMedia

Journal of Community, Citizen's and Third Sector Media and Communication

ISSN 1832-6161

Issue 6 (August) 2010

Shared stories

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Abstract

One of the things we are constantly told about the internet is that the world becomes a smaller place. Communication with like-minded individuals is easier through virtual communication. For radio practitioners this connectivity should allow people with common interests and skills to collaborate more effectively on radio-like productions. Shared Stories is about this type of collaborative production of documentaries and features. The first version of this project involved university students in Australia and England. This paper describes the processes and challenges encountered in this collaboration, identifying the ways in which this form of production can be developed.

This article discusses the processes and challenges involved in the first version of a project that models forms of collaborative radio production in a networked environment. *Shared Stories* Version 1.0 involved the participation of five final year Media students from two universities on different sides of the world, working over 10 weeks to plan and produce a 30 minute radio documentary on the theme of emigration between Australia and the UK. Although situated within a university context, it is hoped that through further modeling the processes could be adapted to enable the sharing of stories in the broader community.

At this time of transition to digital modes of content creation and distribution, graduates seeking employment in the radio industry require skills in delivering material online alongside conventional modes of production and distribution. Many Australian universities now publish the radio work of students on the internet and have embedded this process within curriculum (Phillips and Lindren 2005; Berryman 2005; Coyle 2000).

The research presented in this article is borne out of involvement in earlier projects that use the internet as a platform for collaboratively produced material in a university setting. An influential project developed with Ryerson University has been *The Bouncing Story*. *The Bouncing Story* involves students from different parts of the world working together to produce a serialised radio drama. The story literally bounces from one side of the globe to the other each week, with one group posting an episode online and the other group having a week to respond with the next episode. Lori Becksted (2005) has written about the educational benefits of *The Bouncing Story* style collaborations through the pedagogical lens of 'the seven principles of good teaching' (Chickering and Gamson 1987). These principles, based on 50 years of research, explore the ways teachers teach and students learn, how students work and play with one another, and how students and faculty talk to each other. Whilst sharing the educational values of online projects like *The Bouncing Story*, *Shared Stories* differs in the type of collaboration throughout the production process. The participants are working together through all stages of production in an online

environment. Through a combination of online technologies a form of virtual production studio is established.

The concept behind *Shared Stories* is for radio producers with shared interests but situated in different geographic locations to use weblogs, online production tools and servers to create a collaboratively produced documentary. The weblog is the primary form of mediation employed throughout the production process. It is used initially to generate discussion and identify a theme, discuss production methodology, to post research material and production plans. Interviews are recorded locally and uploaded to a shared server through the weblog. With the use of a media annotation tool, this audio material is reviewed and edit decisions are made. Scripts and rough cuts of the documentary are posted and at the end of the process a documentary is produced that reflects the shared stories of a particular group of individuals from different parts of the world, for a community of interest that recognises and values the shared concerns from both a local and global perspective.

This paper could be about the great success of the project. A documentary was produced and it was aired on community radio in the two countries. The participants all gained a great deal from the experience and the project suggests ways in which other communities of interest can collaborate in this environment. Certainly a lot was achieved. However, upon reflection the most interesting aspects were the challenges and issues of networked collaboration that the project raised. As Bruno Latour (1994) says:

The mediation, the technical translation that I am trying to understand resides in the blind spot where society and matter exchange properties.

If we are to develop sustainable forms of collaborative production and modes of practice, then there is a need to unravel what became a complex web of socio-technical considerations that had direct impact upon this version of the project. In doing so we hope to develop a template for future versions of this type of storytelling that will avoid some of the pitfalls we encountered.

For the RMIT students and admittedly the tutor, the belief was that the only impediment to a truly collaborative feature production would be the technology as initially we believed that all participants had similar motivations for their involvement. Ironically, for the Lincoln students the technology was at first less a concern. Instead, even though they understood and accepted a late start, without an agreed topic some perhaps understandable agitation developed as we approached a regular production deadline for the Australian students: a time they would normally be recording interviews and undertaking some editing and production. Both Lincoln students expressed in the tutorials and latterly in the project a need to speak or communicate with their RMIT counterparts, for example it was noted that early on, 'it may have been a wise decision to at least have one phone call with our co-producers' (Interview with Lincoln student, Joe, 24 June 2008). Arguably, the lack of interaction due to logistics heightened their sense of 'not getting on with it' and perhaps increased the desire towards achieving product *as* outcome as opposed to thinking about *how* the process might in itself assist or affect the outcome. Whilst there were challenges confronted on a purely technical level, it has become clear that technical and human interactions have profound impact on the process and what is achieved.

Similarly, over time it became apparent that the two student cohorts had different approaches to the project. The fact that one group volunteered and the other was being assessed had implications throughout the whole process. The implication being that the assessed group was naturally more concerned about the

final product and less concerned about the process. In contrast, the volunteers were participating because they were expressly interested in the process. They considered that the product would be good if the process was valid. Lincoln student Joe said in a post-project interview,

This was our last big project for the degree so what we would produce was important. I had another project, but when Bryan (lecturer at Lincoln) said what about this ...I was interested...from my personal point of view, working with some students from a completely different part of the world ...a different set of ideas.... a different culture...not a completely different culture, was very exciting. Also using the internet as a communication tool was exciting....with all the talk about it, to see whether it was as revolutionary, as useful as everyone was saying was interesting as well. And it was...it was easy...easyish to communicate, share files and ideas. Rozanna was more interested in the social aspect of it and working with people. I was more interested in the technical....

We had to remind ourselves continually that it wasn't all about the process. We weren't making a documentary about the making of a documentary...we were making a documentary.

Following the conclusion of the project, Australian student Kim (Interview, 15 September 2008) gave a contrasting opinion:

I wanted to do some radio specific work in third year, knowing that the stuff I was doing in the coursework was all mixed in with TV students. I wanted to put into practice the kinds of collaborative processes we'd been learning throughout the course. I wanted to get skills out of this process that I could transfer to my future work outside of uni. And I did. The podcast series I'm doing for the ABC, I'll continue to do when I move to Japan at the end of the year. Because I now have the confidence to work remotely and to deal with people in a virtual environment, I was really motivated by gaining insight into communicating online, collaborating with people I hadn't met before and finding out if it was possible to produce something in that way.

I'm really happy I did it. The fact that I don't like the finished product doesn't matter so much. I'm really happy with the process. What I learnt through the process. I guess for them they definitely didn't get as much out of it as us, because they were only interested in getting their own way on the final outcome.

The week three proposal and final dossier produced by the Lincoln students were equally revealing. They were set out without reference to the means or process of production. That is, there was no consideration that a new and technologically different way of working might provide a direct bearing on the outcome. Instead, this was referenced within the 'aims and objectives' of the project, but was at least considered 'new and revolutionary' and a 'unique production method that will challenge the way documentaries are normally made'. Once again, this was framed within the context of an 'expected' outcome from the start e.g. achieve editorial balance of material and narrative, creativity through actuality, production style. Most notably, the target audience research though methodical and thorough was framed within purely a British context.

Although the students shared many goals, their priorities were different. And these often unspoken motivating forces had real consequences in the way the project progressed. The lecturers had been thinking about process in terms of the technical production. Perhaps this was natural. What we hoped to

achieve was a production form generated through relatively unconventional technical processes. What we were doing was foregrounding the technical challenges of digital production techniques over the dynamics of collaboration in this environment. These dynamics are present in any group setting, but in giving the technical aspects of the project primacy, the production group didn't employ many of the basic production conventions they had learnt through face to face collaboration in a studio setting. By presuming that because the participants all shared a similar radio skills level and production methodology, the task of transposing the production processes employed in the physical studio setting to a virtual environment seemed unproblematic. This ignored the fact that these people had not developed the goodwill and trust built by the shared experience of undergraduate study in the same institution. For example, in a post-project interview with the author Lincoln student Joe said he felt that they hadn't built 'a friendship with the RMIT party' but ironically noted that 'every post and email was very formal and professional'.

Getting ideas and research material onto the blog, uploading raw audio material; how to work with it and make sense of it, and finally how to structure it into a coherent product were legitimate issues, but ended up being more about the technical processes associated with online collaboration, instead of the ways in which the decisions were being negotiated. We were more concerned with making the technical processes work. However, it is consistently evident that both groups exhibited a high degree of professional behaviors albeit through the means they had become used to. Thus one issue is clear, that the use of technology in this case required an adaptation of the students' individual learnt professional practices. In other words, it required a form of metacognition, or thinking about their thinking.

Chris Argyris (Smith 1990) talks about espoused theory or what we say we're doing and theory in use – what we actually do. In the project there was a gap between the espoused theory and the theory in use. The espoused theory, articulated explicitly by the whole group was that the participants wanted to use the collaborative production conventions learnt through their undergraduate radio production training and felt confident that these processes could be employed in a virtual setting. But the theory in use was something different. This new production environment challenged some of the assumptions held. Just because both cohorts were doing Media degrees, didn't mean that their learning was framed by similar pedagogy. Although everyone agreed that the documentary should use the voices of peers to literally tell the shared stories of young people, these unstated assumptions about how this would be reflected in the style of production employed were not.

There was fairly detailed online exchange about the theme, which ended up being about emigration between the two countries. Because everyone knew people who had traveled and settled in the other country, research material was posted by each group and discussion followed. Interviewees were identified and raw material uploaded. However, the fundamental convention of developing a shared production plan was never fully achieved. Why? There are two related reasons that are relevant. The first is concerned with the uncertainty about how the piece would be finally mixed. The second had more to do with the ways in which the participants engaged with the process through the weblog.

Early on there was the possibility that the participants in Lincoln might come to Melbourne for the mix session. But following discussion on the blog it was decided that this would diminish the concept of the whole process being conducted in a virtual environment. Then the idea of developing a plan online was posted, but met with little comment from the other team. When it was raised a second time with a rough production chart, the comment came back that 'we should discuss it later'. This exchange can be

understood as an expressing of the working theory in use which could accommodate shared ideas and ignored those where there was disjuncture. As Chris Argyris explains:

Theories in use are shaped by an implicit disposition to winning (and to avoid embarrassment). The primary action strategy looks to the unilateral control of the environment and task plus the unilateral protection of self and others (Smith 1990).

This type of theory in use was also evident in much of the blog engagement. In the context of Shared Stories, the participants all agreed to work through a weblog. They discussed and explicitly wanted the weblog to be a public document of the process. The espoused theory was a desire for the whole process to be open to public scrutiny. We could have made it a private space. But as Lincoln student Joe pointed out in interview,

No, I didn't want it private. I liked the openness, the idea that we were doing a project that was completely open. Anyone could stumble across it and read about it, our ideas, our thoughts our criticisms. That was really important for me.

Yet when things got tense toward the pointy end of the production, the group went private and resorted to individual email exchange. In contrast RMIT student Kim (2008) says,

I was happy enough for all of our correspondence to be on the blog, but I think the Lincoln crew didn't want you or Bryan to be able to read the exchange that was occurring. There were a couple of really terse email exchanges at that point, where they were pretty much saying this is how it is going to have to be.

Critical exchanges to do with the process, decisions being made and why, were rendered invisible to the observer. There was a gap between what was going on in the blog and the decisions being made. It was noted in a UK tutorial that:

A number of production decisions are being discussed and I'm asked what I think. I have responded with but 'what do your partners think? There seems to be a gap on the blog'. There's no direct answer, I think there is an issue but decide not to pursue it (*Shared Stories* production file, unpublished, 2008).

The participants in Melbourne thought that they would be able to discuss ideas online via the weblog in the same ways that they had learnt through their production courses at RMIT, often as an adjunct to their sessions in the physical studio. What wasn't considered, was that the Lincoln group hadn't used weblogs in their studies and although it didn't take long to work through the technical considerations and conventions of posting and commenting in weblog discussions, the reality was that this had ramifications for communication between participants throughout the whole production process, that is, the way in which ideas would be presented, considered, negotiated and enacted.

I hadn't worked on blogs before. Are Australians more internet savvy, technical? Cause as a nation we blog a bit, maybe a couple of years ago it peaked... but kids my age don't write blogs very much. I was surprised that it's used a lot in their media degree.

Roz didn't like the blog. She's more of a talking type of person...ideas type and I'm technical. She's very strong willed, likes meetings to get things done (Interview with Lincoln student Joe, 2008).

The UK group thought the Australians were direct to the point of being blunt about their views:

Very upfront with their criticisms...this wasn't a bad thing, but we weren't used to it. We knew what they were thinking...they made that very clear... they would say...yes, a good idea...no that doesn't work...maybe...you know where you stand that's for sure.. (*Shared Stories* production file, unpublished, 2008).

In contrast RMIT student, Kim, commented:

I expected them to express concerns through the blog. They didn't ever really express concerns at all. They just defended their own decisions. It was hard working with people who aren't used to online collaboration, which is something we've been trained in. When we get together over coffee to talk about a project, we usually get bored after five minutes and go home to draft an email. So much of what we do is by correspondence anyway. And I guess we could have thought more about how this process would feel to them. I used exactly the same methods as I do at uni. I'm fairly forthright about my views. But I think I'm fairly flexible and open to other ideas. I like to negotiate a way through (Interview, 15 September 2008).

There were real differences in the ways in which the participants engaged with the blog. Some of these differences had to do with experience, but another aspect had to do with the asynchronous nature of discussion and the to and fro of decision making. The blog represented a meeting space, but not the type of meeting possible face to face which Roz in Lincoln had real concerns with. She wanted the meetings to occur through SKYPE instead of the blog. In retrospect SKYPE would have been another useful form of mediation added to the mix.

This means of developing an idea ...felt very limited. This was possibly due to our having to submit ideas to one another in written form, whereas as in a usual brainstorming session people would be able to bounce ideas off each other and discuss variation on a theme in person. In hindsight, I feel that by making use of such a service as Skype we may have been able to overcome this problem somewhat (*Shared Stories* production file, unpublished, 2008).

The weblog mode of discussion was open to many types of interpretation and often not positive or particularly useful. There was a tendency to post a comment and think "there, I've done my bit, the ball is in their court now". When it took some time for a response to be posted, it not only stalled the production process, but also confirmed the defensive positions illustrated in Argyris' model of theory in use and the gap between this the espoused theory of the individual.

Together with the weblog, *Shared Stories* worked with a beta version of a Media Annotation Tool: Protospace. Media annotation proved to be a very useful addition to this process of networked production. Rough cuts of interviews and versions of the initial mixes were uploaded onto Protospace. The Media Annotation Tool allowed each participant to mark specific points along a timeline of the audio and to comment on particular issues. These comments related to content and technical issues. It was one way in the final mix that the Lincoln students could post rough versions and for the RMIT crew to feedback almost immediately. It was through this tool that some differing acoustic qualities were picked up, edit points negotiated and scripting of links developed.

However, again it is clear from the follow up interviews and individual reflective pieces that the participants would have benefited from more time getting to know each other on a personal level, before engaging in the actual production process. Although the students did post biographical notes about themselves on the blog, some Skype exchanges prior to production and at critical milestones in the process would have helped in the bonding of the whole group and reduced the level of separation felt by them. Although there were several 'meetings' in the virtual realm through the weblog, there was a perception that this wasn't the same as a face to face meeting or probably even a meeting via telephone or Skype. The use of Skype for real-time conversations would be particularly useful to clarify and resolve some of the stylistic issues that arose throughout the process.

It is clear in Roz's reflective piece that insofar as the communicative aspects to this project were concerned, she was undergoing a form of kinesthetic learning. Initially she demonstrated a reluctance to move away from what Argyris & Schon (1974) describe as a 'mental map' in order to be able to act in situations. In other words, face to face discussion. Roz notes that she was 'confused by the process' but once the material was up on the blog for her it was 'effective'. A brief analysis suggests that despite being initially open to the new collaborative situation, Argyris's 'theory in use' was only confirmed when she was happy with the technological process and she could see that the consequences of the adapted strategy would be effective and allow her to achieve a goal or final outcome without delay or disruption. Arguably, Argyris's 'cognisance between theory in use and espoused theory' (Smith 1990) was in fact developing, as evidently, for Roz the technology and the process was no longer an obstacle to completing the task.

In future versions of this project it would be advantageous for both groups to either have shared assessment goals or to volunteer involvement as an extra curricula activity. Lincoln has adopted the use of weblogs, overcoming one of the issues encountered. The project would benefit from participants having more time getting to know each other. Perhaps in the preceding semester they could work on a Vox Pop together to bond. This would also assist in developing a shared vocabulary and literacy with real time Skype meetings and further use of a Media Annotation Tool.

This version of *Shared Stories* identified several issues related to collaborative online production. It was fortuitous that throughout the production, an online radio portal was being built at RMIT called ROAR (Radio Online at RMIT). Initially it was intended to be a basic website to showcase the work of radio students at the university. Informed by the *Shared Stories* project ROAR developed to become an integrated content management system with a public interface, but also private project spaces for learning and teaching. Each project has an associated weblog, synchronised to MAT a more developed Media Annotation Tool. This allows students to research and develop ideas on the shared weblog, upload cuts of audio onto MAT for feedback and published on ROAR the piece is completed. The piece is then available also on MAT for peer assessment and lecturer feedback. This type of one stop virtual production and publication facility will assist in further versions of the project.

The process highlighted the importance of establishing a shared understanding of the participants' motivations at the inception of the project, and to develop protocols that can be maintained throughout the production. This version of *Shared Stories* also exemplifies the complex web of socio-technical interactions occurring when radio producers on different sides of the world collaborate in an entirely virtual production environment. With further modeling, it is possible that other communities of interest could use this type of production to extend opportunities to articulate their shared concerns and

aspirations to wider audience.

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