

Peer-reviewed article**Online journalism education in Rwanda: students find value in the Experiential Learning Approach****Joseph Njuguna**Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture
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Abstract

The digital age is reshaping media industries locally and globally, forcing media firms and media producers to master new media tools in order to remain competitive and employable. This technological revolution has had a marked impact on the structures and economic viability of media, necessitating media training institutions to rethink how they prepare future media professionals for work in the twenty-first century. In order to keep pace with these rapid technological changes, educational institutions have had to adjust journalism curricula to integrate online or multimedia journalism courses that build online competencies and the technological skills needed for graduates to flourish in digital media domains. Despite these efforts, industry players still decry the apparent unpreparedness of graduates, largely attributing this to the learning approach taken by universities.

Quality skills training has been argued to ensure that learners can relate with real work life. However, in countries like Rwanda, little is known about whether these new strategies are fostering the knowledge, skills and professional dispositions needed to work in a country that is undergoing rapid technological and economic change. Drawing from experiential learning theory, this study uses five focus-group discussions from five Rwandan journalism schools to glean the views of final-year students on how trainers employ practical pedagogy to cultivate students' online skills in readiness for employment. Findings reveal that students consider the experiential learning approaches to be essential to their perceived online readiness. These enhanced skills were achieved using digital scenarios relating to students' future work environment. However, the perceived quality of this experience varied from trainer to trainer, based on a range of factors including their how students perceived the trainers' attitudes towards new media, their perceived ability to teach the digital skills and the learners' own digital experience and competence.

L'éducation au journalisme en ligne au Rwanda: les étudiants voient l'intérêt de l'approche d'apprentissage expérimental

Résumé

L'ère numérique a incité l'industrie des médias à adopter de nouveaux outils médiatiques pour rester compétitive. Cette révolution technologique a obligé les institutions de formation aux médias à repenser de nouvelles méthodes de préparation des futurs professionnels, avec une tendance à adapter les programmes d'études afin d'intégrer des cours de journalisme en ligne ou multimédia qui renforcent les compétences en ligne des apprenants. En dépit de ces efforts, les acteurs de l'industrie dénigrent encore le manque de préparation apparent des diplômés, en l'attribuant en grande partie à l'approche d'apprentissage. Pourtant, une formation aux compétences de qualité a été mise en avant pour garantir que les apprenants soient en contact avec la vraie vie professionnelle. S'appuyant sur la théorie de l'apprentissage par l'expérience, cette étude utilise cinq groupes de discussion venant de cinq écoles de journalisme rwandaises pour recueillir le point de vue des étudiants de dernière année sur la manière dont les formateurs utilisent des approches pédagogiques pratiques qui cultivent leur aptitude au journalisme en ligne. Bien que les résultats démontrent que les formateurs utilisent des approches pédagogiques compatibles avec l'apprentissage expérimentale – utilisation de scénarios numériques en relation avec le futur environnement de travail des étudiants, cela varie d'un formateur à l'autre, en fonction de leur attitude à l'égard des nouveaux médias, de leur capacité à enseigner les compétences numériques et des attentes des apprenant «plutôt numériques». En règle générale, les étudiants considèrent les approches de formation pratiques comme essentielles à leur perception de l'état de préparation en matière des compétences en ligne.

Introduction

The advent of new media technologies has been hailed as revolutionary to the news media industry. This rapid technological change presents numerous opportunities and challenges for media practitioners (Asadu 2009). In turn, journalism educators must adapt what they teach and how they teach it, in order to prepare graduates for work in the twenty-first century. Research shows that practical experience with Web 2.0 technologies (such as using social media tools like Facebook, Twitter, Blogs, Wikis and YouTube to generate and share content) positions journalism graduates for employment, as newsrooms compete to attract the best new media talent (Iyer 2013; Neidorf 2008). The advent of the 'smart web' (Web 3.0) – which uses semantics and artificial intelligence to 'know' what content users want, and why and how to package it – presents additional challenges and opportunities for educators and learners (Steffens 2015).

Media training institutions have been forced to rethink their learning and teaching strategies to bridge the digital skills gaps occasioned by a new media age that seems to be evolving faster than the

curricula (Jeanti 2015). To prepare for the digital future, training institutions have either integrated digital skills training across the existing courses or developed new stand-alone courses. However, journalism educators have had to rethink their teaching and learning practices in order to find practical and contextually relevant ways of developing the full range of competencies needed to cope with the fast-changing environment (Quinn 2010). Padmanabhan Iyer (2015) argues that such competency-based training should be underpinned by a curriculum adapted to the latest technology, possibly implemented in a simulated newsroom. Furthermore, educators are encouraged to adopt journalism teaching approaches that are suited for the new media learning dispensations if the intended learning outcomes are to be achieved (Jeanti 2015; Steffens 2015; Buckingham 2007).

Learning that is detached from relevant context lacks authenticity, with learners unable to relate knowledge learnt with everyday experiences. Authentic, contextually relevant learning can be achieved through the use of case-based learning which inculcates realistic scenarios of real-life cases into the learning experience (Aifan 2015; Hirst & Treadwell 2011; Kolb 1984; Steffens 2015). By working through these real-life scenarios and cases, learners actively participate, reflecting and experimenting with knowledge in near-professional contexts (also see Herrington, Reeves & Oliver 2010). Since newsroom demands seem to dictate classroom pedagogy, media educators need to adopt more dynamic teaching strategies to fit the industry (Seelig 2010).

This study explores how the experiential learning approach is employed in teaching online (multimedia) journalism in Rwanda and how students perceive this to contribute to their readiness for professional online work. The study is predominantly qualitative and draws on focus group discussions (FGDs) to obtain students' opinions regarding the use of practical, scenario-based and 'real-life' cases in their classes to enhance their online skills learning. The study found that teaching online journalism skills is enabled by a number of factors, including the students' existing digital knowledge; the availability of online tools and the use of real-life examples to provide an authentic and contextually relevant learning experience. Drawing on experiential learning theory, this article explores how final-year journalism students in Rwanda perceive their learning experience and whether they feel equipped to work in online environments.

The 1994 Rwandan genocide was largely epitomised by a hate media that incited ethnic divisions among the population. A critical resolve in post-genocide Rwanda has been to professionalise the rapidly expanding media industry by positioning it as key player in national development including peace building and reconciliation. As Rwanda aspires to be a knowledge-based economy through its Vision 2020, several reforms have been made in different sectors (including media) to integrate new media technologies to drive the realisation of this vision. Since media reforms have included building capacity to leverage the digital revolution for new and exciting media-audience interactions, this study is timely because it explores how experiential learning develops this digital capacity in Rwandan journalism education. Furthermore, the study not only enriches the literature on this approach to digital learning but also seeks to position Rwanda's journalism education in the broader context of emerging approaches to digital skills development for the future professionals.

Experiential learning theory in digital skills development

Experiential learning, propounded by David Kolb (1984), emphasises an idealised form of learning where the learner “reflects, thinks, and acts in a way that responds to the learning situation and tests what is being learned” (Kolb 1984: 24). Contextualised into digital skills training, this theorisation advocates for a pedagogy that goes beyond critiquing the impact of new media on news production. It calls for the integration of new media tools – particularly those relevant in practical journalism training – into the learning experience (Aifan 2015; Hirst & Treadwell 2011). Experiencing such technologies can enhance the expected learning outcomes (Cochrane, Sissons, Mulrennan, & Pamatatau 2013; Steffens 2015; Palilonis 2010). Moreover, incorporating real cases and scenarios in digital teaching can foster learners’ critical thinking in online journalism contexts (Bor 2014; Cochrane *et al.* 2013). Empirical evidence shows that using social media to teach cross-platform skills to journalism students has positively impacted their ability to perform in online environments (see Wenger & Owen 2013 and Quinn 2010).

By virtue of learners deriving meaning from direct experience, Kolb’s model (1984) provides a useful framework for building digital competencies because the learner has the opportunity to reflect on the use of a certain technology and, through repeated practice, to consider what is working or not. When implementing experiential learning strategies educators need to find ways of harnessing the learners’ existing new media skill-sets. Trainers need to find creative and practical approaches to identify and build students existing competencies, lest they get out of tune with the millennials (Jeanti 2015; Singer 2008). This has implications for how teachers develop themselves and how students can manage their own learning.

To sustain digital skills development in the growing array of new media tools, Carol Schwalbe (2009) recommends that educators cultivate the habit of ‘going online’ to discover what tools are being developed and to select new features to add to their teaching portfolio. She further argues that teaching students to teach themselves through different online tools can make teaching much easier. Georgios Terzis (2009) claims the new era of media communication has changed the role of journalism educators from disseminators of knowledge to learning facilitators focused on assisting students to actively engage with information and materials as they construct their own understanding (Hirst & Treadwell 2011). Thus, building digital competence requires adjustments for both the learner and the teacher in terms of what is taught and how it is taught.

Statement of problem

What constitutes quality journalism education for the new media age needs to consider the nature of curriculum and its related infrastructure, but more importantly, the methods of delivering the training content (Kothari & Hickerson 2016; Veglis 2013; Bor 2014; Salaverría 2011; Buckingham 2007).

The quality of journalism education is particularly important in Rwanda. Rwanda’s media policy (2014-2020) mandates access to a variety of news, information and perspectives through an empowered media (Media High Council 2013). Migration to digital media has been slow. The 2017 National Media Dialogue flagged the important role of education in promoting media diversity and quality. The Dialogue interrogated the necessary skills that journalists required to remain relevant in the new

digital age. Rwandan journalism education institutions have been slow to align their programs to the new media technology demands of the industry (Mwai 2017). From an industry perspective, the slow adoption and utilisation of new media technologies by media houses was attributed, largely, to the kind of education and skills that journalists possess. Even new graduates were seen as lacking the competencies needed to work online. Such negative industry feedback has prompted media training institutions across the country to reflect on and adapt the way they prepare future media professionals for the industry.

Inculcating the right digital skills for the new media age involves interrogating how the capacity is being built in the training institutions (Kothari & Hickerson 2016; Veglis 2013; Jeanti 2015). Students' perceptions of their educational experiences are crucial in shaping their learning process and outcomes (Eliasson & Jaakkola 2014; Bor 2014). Therefore, it is important to unearth students' perceptions of the extent to which trainers employ well-tested pedagogical techniques to ensure the expected digital learning outcomes are achieved. Indeed, such an exploration not only has the potential to gather insights into the preparedness of future communication professionals' for digital environments, but also to raise educators' awareness about possibilities for more versatile forms of training such as collaborative digital productions.

There is a dearth of systematic empirical studies relating to online journalism in the Rwandan context. Given that media employers expect 'industry-ready' graduates, assessing their learning environment will identify the circumstances under which these future journalists develop the desired online journalism competencies.

Methodology

To gather opinions regarding undergraduate students' online journalism learning experiences and attitudes, five focus group discussions (FGDs) were organised – one in each of the five journalism schools in Rwandan universities. Currently, Rwanda has five schools of journalism, based at Mount Kenya University (Rwanda Campus), University of Rwanda, Christian University of Rwanda, East African University (Rwanda campus) and Catholic Institute of Kabgayi. Four of these schools offer only a three-year Bachelor's degree and one offers both a Bachelor's and Master's degree. Each programme has units in information and communications technologies (ICTs) or new media technology. FGDs were adopted on their strength of obtaining in-depth views and nuances (Auger, Tanes-Ehle & Gee 2017) of the students' online learning experiences and circumstances. Each focus group comprised six final-year students, i.e. three students of each gender, selected through systematic random sampling from their class lists (every fourth name from the first selected) and on confirmation of their readiness to volunteer to participate. The discussions took an average of 80 minutes.

Prior to the FGDs, a preliminary desk study established that all five schools had an average of two online-related journalism courses with learning outcomes or objectives focusing on imparting necessary practical skills to create or produce news content for the online platforms such as digital newspapers, online radio and TV and institutional websites. All the online journalism courses in the schools studied bear 20 credits, which is the highest number for a module under Rwanda's Higher Education policy. In these courses, the training methodology and assessments emphasised more

practical productions than theory. For example, students were required to be able to produce an online newspaper, a personal website and a professional blog. This observation was useful in triangulating views from the FGDs.

The recorded opinions of students were transcribed and analysed thematically to identify keywords or themes that coalesced around online journalism readiness and experiential teaching strategies. To maintain confidentiality during the analysis, participants were assigned codes according to their focus groups, i.e. FGD1 (Mt Kenya university); FGD2 (East African University); FGD3 (Catholic Institute of Kabgayi); FGD4 (University of Rwanda) and; FGD5 (Christian University of Rwanda).

Ethical considerations

The research ethics approval was granted by the Directorate of Research and Innovation of the University of Rwanda, one of the researcher-affiliated institutions mandated by Rwanda's National Council of Science and Technology (NCST) to vet external researchers in Rwanda. A local academic appointed by the university ensured that the data collection respected the research guidelines. Respective school/department heads in each university availed contacts of outgoing (final year) students with assurances that results would be shared to improve the digital teaching practices at the given schools. A briefing session with students was organised to obtain their informed consent and assure them that their opinions would be used anonymously in the results, would only serve to further scholarly knowledge, and was not meant for news publication. Questions focused on students' views regarding 'online readiness' and how experiential learning strategies enhanced this readiness. To ensure data accuracy, each FGD ended with a summary of key issues discussed to ensure participants' errors of interpretation were addressed before analysis.

Findings

Perceptions of 'online readiness' among journalism students

There is no universally accepted definition of 'online journalism readiness'. FGD participants' views on what constituted 'online readiness' were both creative and diverse. However, they did converge around some common themes including the technical ability to use new media tools to deliver content to diverse audiences on online platforms.

A dominant theme that emerged from the FGDs was the ability to produce content for online platforms. For example, students described "online journalism readiness" as: "(the) ability to produce news for online media" (FGD2 participant, FGD4 participant, FGD3 participant), "readiness to produce multimedia content" (FGD3 participant, FGD1 participant), "creating content for online audiences" (FGD3 participant, FGD1 participant, FGD2 participant), "collecting and producing journalism news on the Internet" (FGD4 participant), "being ready to communicate online" (FGD1 participant), the "ability to know how to select tools which can be used communicate with audiences in an Internet environment" (FGD5 participant) and being "ready to use new media tools like social media to interact with online audiences" (FGD5 participant).

Numerous participants felt that future journalism practitioners also needed to know how to identify the right new media tools to interact with the right audiences and to provide audiences with the right content. This perspective was well captured by an FGD4 participant, who viewed ‘online readiness’ as mastering the skills to use new media tools to effectively interact with audiences on the online platform:

I think as journalists we should be able to use social media to develop messages that enable our institutions to talk with audiences [...] the news consumers now have these tools so it is necessary to use them to debate issues together, for example, some producers ask contributions on a topic [...] and it becomes very interesting when viewers or listeners are engaged.

This view was echoed by other participants: “we need to be able to use Internet tools to source and create news for audiences” (FGD2 participant); “knowledge of different social media tools is a must for one to be ready for online contributions” (FGD1 participant); “I think the real test is your ability to show your skills in using different tools to develop stories online” (FGD5 participant); “one is supposed to demonstrate his or her Internet skills research, use of social media and other techniques” (FGD3 participant) and “with so many Internet tools, one needs to try and be updated especially the different social media” (FGD1 participant).

A FGD5 participant emphasised the importance of self-directed learning, experimentation and the critical skills to make decisions about what works in different contexts: “there is a lot to learn from social media sites and other online resources, but I think the challenge is to explore what works for modern professionals”. Still, some participants considered an ‘online ready’ professional as one characterised by the ability to explore what audiences want and how to package news for them: “in the Internet age, you need to know who is your audience and how you can satisfy what they are asking for” (FGD4 participant); “I think the ability to research and follow what your target audiences are doing is a requirement, otherwise the audiences will be ahead” (FGD2 participant); and “being ready means the ability to produce what online audiences want like an interesting story” (FGD3 participant).

The participants’ views accord with contemporary understandings of journalists (professionals) and audiences as interdependent co-producers of content with equal access to the tools of communication. As a FGD5 participant succinctly put it:

One aspect of online journalism readiness should be to go where audiences have ‘migrated’ through their phones and other Internet sites so news producers should reach them with relevant content but also remember the audiences may even have [sic] more information than them [...] it becomes a challenge to producers.

[...] to me, being ready online is being able to know how to use different new media [tools] to develop interesting stories for all types of audiences. But it is not easy to know all [...] although most people are now connected to Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and others, so I think journalists and communicators should also be connected.

In comparing new and old media, a participant extolled the value of being able to produce local stories that can be accessed globally, stating that with online media, “you can produce content to be read or

viewed by many audiences all over the world [...] it is not like newspapers or radio where some [sic] has to be there listening or reading [...] people can get your news anytime (FGD4 participant).

The participants' views on online journalism readiness align with scholarly perspectives, which see it as being underpinned by the rich use of new media tools to deliver content to diverse audiences on online platforms (Seelig 2010; Salaverría 2011; Bor 2014).

Effectiveness of online journalism teaching techniques

Access to human and technological resources can affect the learning experience of journalism students. Rwandan industry has been critical of ICT educational outcomes in local universities because of the lack of available human and technological resources. When coupled with rising student numbers, industry players argue that teaching of ICTs is likely to suffer (Media High Council 2013).

However, we argue that online journalism skills can be developed without high-cost investments in technology, provided that students and teachers have access to the Internet. Internet can be accessed at different points and in different spaces, such as computer labs, Wi-Fi routers and Internet hotspots. If students and teachers have access to the Internet, we contend that a flexible journalism teaching and learning atmosphere is possible if the learning experience is adjusted to ensure students can utilise the tools that are readily available. Accordingly, in our study we sought student feedback on the participants learning experience in terms of:

1. their perceptions of techniques that built the necessary online competencies for future journalism professionals and
2. perceptions of teaching approaches that seemed out of step with their online readiness competence development.

Instances of perceived poor online journalism pedagogy

Although most participants across the five FGDs commended their trainers' approaches to teaching digital skills, a few misgivings surfaced in the discussions. These misgivings were to do with the teachers' choice of teaching materials, the balance between theory and practical experiences, the demonstrable knowledge of a teacher, the depth of coverage of content and the teachers' general attitude to new media teaching. Some trainers were considered too slow to adapt to the new media environment. Students' perceptions around teacher attitudes were shaped by their choice of teaching materials. A respondent in FGD3 contended that:

When doing web design, we should have focused more on practical examples than theories [...] I think the teacher tended to spend more time on theory. In the end we had inadequate time for practice. I think the course should be purely practical – we can learn theories later on our own. (FGD3 participant)

One respondent observed that they spent "too much time learning how to create a blog and did not have time for practicing other aspects of web design and social media tools" (FGD1 participant). Another participant added, "I did not enjoy the exercise on HTML code [...] it was quite complicated

for most of us. We may not even use the skills at work” (FGD2 participant). A FGD5 participant attempted to sum up some of the frustrations regarding the teaching of online skills in their class:

I think teaching should be more focused and planned to ensure students do not lose anything. For example, most of what we were supposed to learn in the course outline, was not adequately covered. Although the few exercises helped somehow [...] we could have missed some important knowledge and skills.

While recognising the efforts made by their teachers in a digital editing class, some participants felt that teachers lacked technological expertise in the application of digital tools such as Adobe Premiere and Final Cut Pro. For example, some students referred to a situation where they were asked to read the manual and teach themselves: “the teacher confessed he had not familiarised himself with the tools and asked a student to demonstrate to others [...] we used the manual to learn” (FGD4 participant).

This approach did provide opportunities for peer-to-peer learning, where students with more experience can coach others. Therefore, reading the manual “was helpful”, according to an FGD2 participant, while an FGD4 participant explained, “once we spent almost a whole afternoon with the lecturer troubleshooting a website our group had developed. We were helped by a colleague from another group”.

A lack of resources was seen as compromising the learning experience, with one participant acknowledging: “though [sic] lecturer was active, we were disappointed by lack of Internet sometimes. And many times, sharing the lab with business students affected our practical classes” (FGD4 participant).

However, one participant expressed concern about the course content, stating the lecturer was “a bit traditional” because of his/her focus on email communications as examples of what students should learn: “I think everyone knows about email and even have an address. In a multimedia class, I expected to learn more [...] such as different social media strategies and how they can be relevant in our professional lives” (FGD3 participant).

Some participants were critical of the self-directed learning approach adopted by some teachers, claiming they were left to “struggle” or “feeling unsupported”. Participants revealed that some lecturers tended to imagine that “students should teach themselves social media skills and left them to struggle with difficult tasks” (FGD1 participant). Other teachers are said to have “taught one or a part of a new media tool [...] such as website construction – and assumed that students can learn the rest” (FGD5 participant). As argued elsewhere in this study, adopting a ‘self-teaching’ approach has its merits and demerits. It is incumbent upon trainers to strike a balance between support and self-directed learning to ensure learners develop the required digital competencies. The participants also attested to the lack of online expertise, complaining:

It seems some of our teachers used old software before [...] that is why they are picky in the software they teach. For example, when editing with Adobe Audition and Premiere software for TV and radio production, some of the students know more because they have already used it on their own. (FGD1 participant)

Some participants conceded that they expected skills gaps between lecturers and students because of the generational differences (FGD1, FGD2 and FGD5). Acknowledging these differences highlights the importance of teachers finding effective ways to leverage students' existing knowledge to build enhanced digital competencies (Iyer 2015; Schwalbe 2009; Patrão & Figueiredo 2011).

Instances of perceived good online journalism teaching practices

Regarding the extent to which new media pedagogy practices supported this perceived readiness among the participants, there was evidence that journalism educators in all schools employed experiential learning strategies in teaching online skills. Some media educators encouraged a self-learning attitude, believing that students had the digital acumen to innovate.

Where trainers used practical examples, participants seemed to extol the benefits of utilising 'life' examples to illustrate how to use new media tools. Examples were given of lecturers enlivening the lessons around in-depth discussions of local news sites or the use of digital tools that students identified with. By employing real-world examples, participants reported quickly grasping concepts and being encouraged to try out tools by themselves. One participant commented:

I remember when we were learning the basics of web design and the lecturer used the Rwandan Revenue Authority website. On the screen, it was easy to see how websites are designed [...] the characteristics and different sections. Although when we were shown the code behind, it become difficult to imagine how journalists can be programmers. This example was good for us to see a product of web design. (FGD2 participant)

Despite the example of a web site and its features, some participants expressed their reservations about their web design abilities because it seemed too complex on the coding aspect. This view was shared by a number of participants in FGD2, FGD3 and FGD4, who seemed to be comfortable being 'digital users' but not 'designers', as observed in the following quote:

During our multimedia class, the lecturer used the HTML code of a website. I think it was *The New Times* newspaper website [...] I don't remember how we got it – but everybody was like, are we supposed to learn all these symbols (codes) in this course? The entire activity seemed a computer science [...] For me, the basics would have been adequate for our level. (FGD4 participant)

In some cases, use of real-world examples helped students to visualise and reflect on an issue. An example given was during an interpretive reporting assignment where students were asked to develop a multimedia story on a topic of their choice. A participant exemplified how the lecturer's demonstration using a YouTube video, *The Inconvenient Truth*, on climate change (by Al Gore, a former Vice President of USA), brought a better understanding of the characteristics of a compelling story:

Yeah, I think the video showed some reality on how climate is changing and why we need to worry. The facts were clear for those in denial about these issues. I liked the production – real images of environment destruction, comments by experts, good research on the topic, and, it was great to learn how to produce a multimedia story. (FGD4 participant)

Being involved in the production of school newspapers and being involved in the design and layout of an online newspaper was seen as both educative and exciting.

I think online journalism was real to us when we were shown how to upload our school newspaper [...] on the school website. Before, we mostly learnt how to design and layout the hard copy [...] but creating the soft (online) version was great for our experience. I know students can now send stories online. (FGD4 participant)

The online examples given in class seemed to open the eyes of some students to the vastness of Internet tools. To make the learning more meaningful, lecturers used real examples to illustrate what learners could expect in the field after graduation (FGD2, FGD3, FGD4 participants). By exposing students to real examples of social media productions, participants also reported being inspired to create their own 'online presence'. In the words of one participant:

The lecturer used online profiles of different artists to show how audiences were interacting with them. The comments about the artist's work created some popularity for him [...] although not all comments were very good. Such media can surely be used to promote a person [...] I think we should all try this. (FGD2 participant)

Since social media tools can be used to enhance visibility of journalists, media content and media firms, future journalists need to understand how to use social media tools to maximise attention (Patrão & Figueiredo 2011). Based on an exercise to assess the websites of some institutions, one participant acknowledged the benefits of this approach in highlighting the importance of improving online skills: "We appreciated what is a good or bad website [...] but I felt that I could have done better with the right skills. If we can do more practical exercises, it is possible to develop better websites, even for institutions". (FGD4 participant)

Exploring the journalistic potential for different social media platforms, participants acknowledged the power of social media in a classroom learning setup. Some typical comments included: "I know schools that have embedded social media tools such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and Flickr [...], lecturers encourage constant interaction with students and the outside world" (FGD1 participant). By contrast, another participant stated that students and staff "rarely post content" (FGD3 participant) on their website.

Although students appreciated how social media tools could be used beyond social purposes, the findings also revealed that their potential was not fully tapped in class situations. As an FGD participant observed, in reference to an assignment to debate the social media profiles of their favourite Rwandan artists, "It opened our eyes to the many opportunities one can get when you are online" (FGD3 participant). Another participant expressed satisfaction with the social media networks formed in the classroom setting, but was concerned that the learning did not continue beyond the classroom, suggesting the need for some informal learning opportunities for journalism students to exploit their full potential in the workplace:

Though we learnt, in theory, about many social media tools, I mostly learnt when the lecturer used some online blogs to show how professionals can create and use them for identity and image [...] it was easy to create. We saw how artists get promoted through comments made by readers. The only problem, we as students might not have time to

post many stories on our blogs [...] – since we stopped working on the blogs when the class ended. (FGD3 participant)

Despite social media being a lived experience of most journalism students, they do not see these tools as part of their professional toolkit. Cochrane *et al.* (2012:170) observe that despite the overwhelming evidence supporting social media tools in journalism education (by their functionality in discourse facilitation), “their potential is sometimes not fully exploited”. Researchers argue that educators face the uphill task of demonstrating the professional value of such tools to their learners by requiring them to be self-supporting and adaptable (Hermida 2010; Tanner 2014).

Mobile phones provide another opportunity for students to extend their online production skills without the use of expensive equipment. A FGD1 participant explained:

During the multimedia production course, our group was tasked to produce a documentary on ‘*Ndi Umunyarwanda*’ (I am Rwandan) policy. That time the studios were not yet installed but, the use of the mobile phones, on a daily basis, provided an opportunity to learn something professional [...]. I think in the end there will be no need of laboratories and studios.

Using mobile phones for production offers an opportunity for educators to teach traditional journalism skills in a new and more integrated, digitally converged way. Participants in this study were enthusiastic about exploring the digital possibilities of the mobile phone, suggesting that they would be keen to embrace the integration of mobile phones for teaching journalism skills (Bethell 2010). This view was especially expressed in FGD1, FGD4 and FGD5 where the mobile phones played a key part in their practical teaching and learning of journalistic skills.

Group work is seen as a positive teaching strategy to build digital competencies by allowing students to share their knowledge and skills. Group work, where students engage in practical activities, supports peer-led learning and allowing students to showcase their skills and learn from others to improve their weaknesses (FGD1, FGD2, FGD4 and FGD5). A FGD4 participant commented about the learning benefits of multimedia production in groups: “ [...] in our assignment to analyse how interactive the online newspapers in Rwanda were, I learnt a lot of things to enable me to assess a good or bad online site”. Another participant expressed how she learnt digital skills from the synergy of skills from group members:

I think each of us is good in some skills [...] I know our colleague [name withheld] is good in website design but not in video production. When we were assigned to develop a multimedia production in the online journalism class, we had to collaborate. I can give another example where the lecturer said he knows little about web design using Dreamweaver tools [...] especially the practical aspects, and this colleague became ‘our tutor’ and we learnt. (FGD4 participant)

Group learning practice has been argued to favour technical subjects, such as ICT, where educators perceive digital learning as a ‘process’ not a ‘product’. Teachers partner with students to design the learning activities that build students’ innovativeness and resilience. Team learning allows students to collaborate and support each other as they reflect on what they learn, thereby improving their ability to work in multi-function teams (Patrão & Figueiredo 2011). Furthermore, research shows that such

co-learning gives students the opportunity to develop their evaluative skills when they interact with real exemplars rather than verbal explanations (Hodgson & Wong 2011).

Digital skills can further empower journalism students to find their own solutions beyond learnings in the class and instructions from the teacher. The complexity of some of the technical projects assigned and lecturers' limited capacities led students to look for their own examples and solutions. A FGD2 participant argued that with the right online research skills "you can get any information to help you with what you don't understand in class". Another participant observed,

I got an idea of online web design tutorials from a colleague and taught myself the skills. I can do a simple website [...] where I can just modify the design from some online template. I think it is also easy to learn different social media tools this way. (FGD1 participant)

The above observation supports the view that web 2.0 tools can facilitate digital learning beyond the limits of a book, teacher or classroom, thereby ensuring the learner can remain up to date (Tang & Austin 2009). As one participant observed, digital media competencies can support lifelong learning.

Our lecturers sometimes think we know a lot especially in technology. This can be wrong [...] but since most of us have access to the new media tools, it is easy to interact with them. The thing is, we as journalism students are supposed to go out and discover [...] new media are our tools, why not teach yourself more about how they work? Of course, lecturers also have a role to guide us with what we should focus on. (FGD1 participant)

However, participants called for a balance between learning by oneself and consulting the lecturer, especially for difficult production tasks:

Of course online learning has some disadvantages, for example, how can one learn TV production, or online or radio with guidelines. I Googled [sic] TV production tutorials but what I got was not practical for me [...] for such practical tasks like producing for TV or radio, I think the teacher is necessary, otherwise you can get stuck with some steps. (FGD2 participant)

I used online materials from a guest speaker who was invited in a print production class to demonstrate newspaper design and layout of newspapers. Due to the many steps involved in production, students could not follow in a single class:

The online link for design tutorials and the examples he gave, particularly online documents like brochures and newsletter he had developed, facilitated our understanding on how to produce a newspaper or magazine. Some of my colleagues now play this role of design and layout in the production of the '*Kaminuza Star*' newspaper. (FGD4 participant)

Researchers stress the need for students to extend their news reporting skills out of the lecture by learning to find relevant online sources, create content and conduct editing on the web platforms, thereby enjoying the enriched opportunities offered by the web (Hodgson & Wong 2011). This view is supported by one participant who opines that since all new media knowledge cannot be learnt in class, "some will be learnt on the job and also students will explore by themselves" (FGD3 participant).

Some scholars contend that students can use online social networks to build collaborative online communities of practice with their working counterparts in a way that improves their perceptions of the new media tools that professional use (Tsai, Laffey & Hanuscin 2010). In support of this viewpoint, a FGD3 participant likened using online tools for online journalism training to “setting up a digital newsroom” in a classroom environment. Despite the positive use of social media for learning, one participant lamented an unethical issue in a class Facebook page moderated by lecturer where topical issues were shared: “It was fun as everyone contributed ideas about a crucial issue of relocating our school to another campus,” however, one student took advantage of the online anonymity to pass a love message to the female lecturer, which earned him a serious warning once he was discovered (FGD4 participant).

While social media tools have their downsides, this study reveals how students can leverage and build their strengths to interact, collaborate, and create a dialogue with an audience in an appropriate manner (Auger, Tanes-Ehle & Gee 2017; Patrão & Figueiredo 2011; Hermida 2010).

Discussion

This study sought to explore journalism students’ views on the contribution of experiential learning approach in improving their perceived online journalism readiness. Through a glance at how they learnt the skills, the study has provided interesting insights into the students’ perceptions of the relevance of the pedagogy practices adopted in the multimedia (online) journalism classes. The notion of online readiness for future media professionals, in the FGDs, appears to be understood in the context of such frames as the “right content for online audiences”, “exploring different new media tools to communicate to different audiences at the online front” and “the ability to understand what online audiences need and present the content appropriately”.

To build the level of online readiness desired, participants appreciated the different pedagogical approaches employed by teachers in their universities, although some students and trainer attitudes to new media learning do differ. Consistent with Kolb’s (1984) experiential learning approach that emphasises the application of knowledge through reflective observation, most participants reported that effective multimedia teaching favoured active experimentation with real scenarios (for example, analysis of existing websites, studying blog profiles of artists, creation of a class Facebook page, and adopting a ‘newsroom setup’ in producing the online school newspaper). Attestations from many participants provide evidence that a number of educators integrate formal journalistic learning with experience or actual case studies that serve to address the academic and professional information needs of the students. Adopting such learning experiences has been argued to closely replicate real practice (Hodgson & Wong 2011). As Stephen Tanner (2014:99) contends, unless the learning experience is anchored authentically [...], the industry bemoans it as “a poor substitute for the reality of working in the newsroom”.

The results indicate the gradual realisation by Rwandan media educators that, by virtue of having a better digital head-start than their lecturers, journalism students can easily ‘self-learn’ with the new media tools if they embrace innovation and creativity. For example, some innovative students already explore user-friendly and free online tools such as web-design tutorials to improve their practical skills beyond the classroom. The analysis showed instances where lecturers temporarily adopted students

as ‘co-teachers’ to demonstrate technical production skills such as web design and editing of videos and audio materials. Since the teaching and assessment methodology in the online journalism curricula emphasise more practical teaching, students’ revelations confirm that, indeed, a number of teachers employed some form of real-life practical work.

Despite the challenges of large class sizes and few technical learning materials (e.g. computer laboratories and studios), participants in some journalism departments hailed the creativity of using new media tools like smart phones as stopgap measures in multimedia production. The study demonstrated examples of classes where mobile phones were adopted to shoot videos and record narration (voice-over), then use integrated software to edit and produce near-professional productions, which could be uploaded on the school webpage. This mobile way of practicing journalism created personalised learning environments for students who slowed down their clamour for production studios. For most participants, the smart phone innovation is revolutionary and goes a long way to solving issues:

This is incredible [...] maybe we no longer need to fight for studios. I think with a good phone we can still produce professionally – only that educators might ‘assume that all students own a smart phone [...] which is not true. Some of us own the ‘*karasharamye*’ (outdated) type which cannot be compared to a smart phone. (FGD5 participant)

Despite evidence of experiential learning in the schools explored, challenges still exist. These include: teaching ‘heavy’ topics like web design in a single multimedia class; lecturers who emphasise theory and ‘outdated’ software; students learning too many new media tools but mastering none, and infrastructural limitations like poor internet connectivity. To realise the expected learning outcomes in multimedia courses, researchers propose a continuous retooling of lecturers to align them with new media innovations and integrating practical online skills and ethics (not one-off, stand-alone courses) across the different courses throughout the curriculum (Kothari and Hickerson 2016; Veglis 2013; Iyer 2015).. Concerned institutions should also develop elaborate Internet access to ensure students’ uninterrupted learning in programs like journalism which is online-intensive (Eliasson & Jaakkola 2014). This is expected to enhance independent experiential learning as envisaged under the modular system which is adopted across all Rwandan higher educational institutions.

Conclusion

The study explored Rwandan media students’ opinions regarding the contribution of experiential learning approach in building their competencies for the online workplace. By illuminating the relationship between digital media learning strategies and journalism students’ online readiness, we have elucidated the relevance of innovative scenario-based teaching and learning techniques that support students ‘authentic’ learning. This implies that learners can make explicit links between theory and practice using real scenarios that represent on-the-job experiences (Veglis 2013). The findings give credence to the role of experiential learning as a pedagogical strategy that cultivates students’ efficacy for actual performance in the workplace. The overall perception created by the participant comments can be viewed as a deliberate effort by both lecturers and students to ‘authentically’ their learning experiences to reflect real-world expectations. The digital habits of journalism students were also considered key in initiating self-learning as complementary to the

educators' teaching efforts. This allows a versatile form of learning where students are taught and encouraged to 'go online', discover and learn on their own.

Pedagogically, the availability of different new media tools and 'live' online examples, provides a wealth of possibilities for educators and learners to design learning spaces that situate the learner at the centre of experience. Furthermore, exploring Rwandan journalism students' perceptions of their experiential digital learning has shed light on the effectiveness of online journalism teaching approaches and the extent to which students appreciate the outcomes. More systematic research needs to be done on digital self-learning among students to establish which new media tools are associated with the greatest satisfaction as far as cognitive and educational needs achievement are concerned.

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