Interrogating Our Past Practice as We Scale the Walls of the Box We Call Journalism Education

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Introduction

Many journalism educators in Canada arrive in the academy with deep, varied, and direct journalism experience. This paper examines some potential impacts of our mainstream media experiences on the seemingly urgent need to reimagine journalism education. Drawing on industry and academic research, interaction with students and colleagues, and twenty-plus years working as a journalist, I invite colleagues to explore with me some of the ways our industry experiences may be hindering our work as journalism educators. My central argument is that working journalists tend not to reflect deeply on what they're doing while they're doing it. This lack of reflexivity can become entrenched and has potential to hinder our teaching and student learning.

In this paper, I share some of my experiences as both a journalist and a teacher. The reflections about my journalism practice are meant to provide some insights into what I now consider to be examples of flawed thinking in the areas of ethics and critical thinking. I will also explore some related experiences in my role as a journalism educator that showcase some of my previously unexamined assumptions about teaching and learning. The sharing of personal reflections is meant to inform my overall claim that if we are to advance an effective plan for journalism education by 2020, we must do a more careful job of probing our past practice and its impact on our work as journalism educators.

The paper then turns to two approaches that could help us think about new ways to interrogate past experience. Both are rooted in reflective practice and may benefit journalism educators charged with reimagining the curriculum. The first is a pedagogical model titled "Decoding the Disciplines" (Middendorf & Pace 2004) that offers a structured way to interrogate and challenge how we have come to know what we know as experts in our field. The second provides a framework to support our development as critically reflective teachers. As Brookfield (1995) and Larrivee (2000) discuss, developing a critically reflective practice involves more than simply talking about what we do as teachers. It requires an *active* interrogation of our own assumptions, judgments, and beliefs with the long-range

goal of transforming our work with students. The work is circular, incremental, and ongoing. Larrivee's framework takes us through the stages of developing a reflective practice, a brief summary of which is offered later.

This paper may be of interest to professionals who after significant time "in the field" now find themselves teaching students in myriad disciplines such as law, education, interior design, social work, justice studies, and medicine. The intended audience, however, is the journalism educator, who over the past thirty years has had to navigate the choppiest of waters with respect to the shifting media landscape that is journalism today (Carnegie-Knight Initiative 2011; Huey, Nisenholtz, and Sagan 2013; Lynch n.d.; Singer 2010; Webb 2015). A literature review supports my concern that the deeper we immerse ourselves in the complex issues facing journalism, the more anxious, confused, and arguably defensive some of us become. The scholarly narrative suggests that we journalism educators are resistant to pedagogic change (Massé and Popovich 2007), not especially adept at calculating the impacts of technological change (Huey, Nisenholtz, and Sagan 2013), not enjoying a good fit within the academy (Zelizer 2004, 2009; Hamilton 2014), in disagreement with one another (Blom and Davenport 2012), and at odds with those in industry about what should constitute a journalism education (Finberg and Klinger 2014). Attendees at the May 2014 Toward 2020: New Directions in Journalism Education conference in Toronto, out of which this volume emerged, heard media scholar Robert Picard say that our "curriculums have been designed to produce news factory workers who can be dropped into a slot at a journalism factory".[1] We realize, of course, that many of these factories are downsizing, if not closing. Yet it is inside these factories that many of us honed and mastered our ways of thinking and doing. Yes, we learned a complex array of skills on the job, many as important today as they were decades ago – keenly observing our surroundings, developing creative ideas, conducting research, interpreting data, interacting with and evaluating information from sources, verifying our findings, producing stories to benefit the public. But in these same factories we also adopted some deeply ingrained and potentially problematic approaches that guided our practice, and eventually our pedagogy. The breaking news and quick-turnaround settings in which we worked required (and still do require) a type of thinking that is on some level incongruent with the critical reflexivity associated with exemplary teaching. The aim of this paper, then, is to pry open the door to conversations that may help us better identify the role our ingrained professional practices are playing as we work, as we teach, and as we together plot the future of journalism education.

From the Newsroom to the Classroom

To understand where we're going, it's important to look back. My path into journalism education will likely sound familiar to many colleagues. In 1988, while obtaining a bachelor's degree in journalism, I began working as a television reporter for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. For the next twelve

years, I worked in television and radio doing a mix of reporting and editing in both daily news and current affairs formats. In the early 2000s, I ventured into post-secondary teaching while continuing to work as a freelancer. In 2010, during my college's transition to a university, I obtained an MA in Communication and Technology, and in 2011, I became an assistant professor of journalism. My entry into the academy was not without challenges. At first, my inexperience translated into distorted expectations of students and not much knowledge about effective teaching methods. I expected of students an intrinsic ability to articulate and pitch rich story ideas, shoot coherent video sequences, adhere to strict deadlines, and deliver polished, industry-standard work. I also expected of them a deep level of detachment with respect to their sources, which must have been confusing to them given that I also wanted them to exude a type of passion for the stories in which these sources appeared. Despite my own challenges in translating for them my knowledge of journalism into quality teaching, some students produced excellent projects. But I confess that in those early years, when they faltered, I quietly blamed them. How had they missed my clear instructions on the need for focus? Why had they missed the central conflict in the story? How had they allowed a self-serving source to so heavily influence their thinking? More than a dozen years later, I still find myself apologizing whenever I see members of those early cohorts who were subjected to my ill-defined understanding of "experiential learning," which was a messy "I have shown you, now get out there and do it" approach to teaching. This approach may have provided some benefits to students, but it was also lacking. I had done little to expand my understanding of how students learn, and I had not subjected my assumptions, values, and beliefs about journalism practice to any sort of critical review.

Rushed Journalists as Educators

Over time, I have created more space to investigate many aspects of my own journalism practice, as well as my teaching practice. This type of reflexive work is ongoing and pulls in many directions, but the areas I find myself most drawn to are ethics and critical thinking. My colleagues and I talk about ethics, a lot. Like several journalism programs, we offer an ethics course in year two, taught by a seasoned journalist-professor and designed to help students better navigate their journalism practice through a careful examination of key principles. During our faculty's ongoing discussions about course offerings, I have supported keeping the ethics course, for it offers students time to read rich case studies and to discuss rigorously the ethics of journalism. There are times, however, when I have wondered whether we should dismantle the course and leave the teaching of ethics solely to the journalist-teachers in practice-based courses, who have always helped students navigate ethical dilemmas in real time. I have little doubt that it is within these partnerships that our students do most of their learning about what it is to be a journalist, including what it means to navigate difficult ethical terrain. But in production courses, most of which are housed within the tight strictures of the semester system, we engage in a rushed approach that can mirror

the newsroom environments of our pasts. This rushing tends to obscure for students some important thinking that should be happening at every decision point along every project continuum. For example, when they pitch a story, do we systematically help situate for them where their story fits into the larger social agenda? In other words, does that story in any way question or disrupt the grand narratives at play? Do we routinely help them locate and name their biases and world views in an effort to assess how such things impact the projects they propose? And do we actively negotiate where and how the student-journalists' own personal and professional voices will be heard? Sometimes we do these things. But in deadline-driven environments, we can find ourselves glossing over naming and discussing the intellectual moves our students are undertaking. I contend that this is because many journalist-teachers have had little practice at slowing down enough to distill into explicit chunks their own thinking and doing.

Our Engagement with Sources

Let us look at the more specific issue of how we coach students to engage with sources. While this coaching is often positively influenced by our own experience in the field, sometimes our negative yet deeply ingrained habits have followed us into the journalism classroom. These habits include settling on sources not because they represent the best journalistic choices but because they're available in advance of pressing deadlines; prescriptively crowbarring a set number of sources (three seems to be the magic number) into common formats; finding sources who reinforce the he-said-she-said approach to news; and repeatedly going back to the same sources rather than seeking out new or more diverse ones. Of all of these habits, among the more concerning relates to how we go about convincing inexperienced or vulnerable sources to take part in our reporting projects. Our students do well when it comes to finding sources, and over time, they show high levels of organization and determination in securing people to talk, on the record. But sometimes things go sideways with those sources. As a faculty co-editor of our online news publication, I have been directly or peripherally involved in reviewing a handful of cases in which sources launched complaints. Most arose from people who were inexperienced sources. Their concerns can be captured by statements such as:

I didn't know this interview would be published online.

I was taken out of context.

I agreed to the interview, but now I regret my participation.

I agreed to the interview, but the story wasn't what I would have written.

When people search my name, they see this story.

Less frequently, we run into another type of complaint: sources tell us they thought they were participating in a student's school assignment as opposed to a public reporting project. In most cases, our students have been able to produce evidence that they identified themselves as journalists and provided sources with links to our news publications. Nonetheless, inexperienced sources often recall these exchanges differently. In most cases, complaints are quickly resolved. But they speak to the larger issue of how we teach our students to engage with sources who sometimes lack understanding about what we do. What we are modelling to our students may be at the centre of the issue. I invite journalists-now-educators to examine how we went about managing our own relationships with sources. Many of us were experts at manipulating them into participating as characters in our stories. The use of the word "manipulate" may rankle, but it is deliberately used to describe situations in which we skilfully sold inexperienced sources on the benefits of participation. We used phrases such as "the public good" or "face of the story" or "let others know they're not alone" as ways to nudge sources into telling us their compelling and often highly personal stories. In most cases, these sources seemed pleased with the outcomes. But I confess that as a journalist, I spent little time contemplating whether sources' participation might have been in any way harmful to them, nor did I see evidence that my editors were engaging in this type of contemplation. The only times I had extended conversations with editors about sources was when I interviewed subjects who had requested anonymity, said something potentially libellous, or threatened legal action after publication. The following recollection is an example of how I engaged with one particular source, early in my career as a television journalist:

> I profiled a teenager in the early 1990s who had been forced to work in prostitution. Her accounts of being forced to have sex with many men, often one after the other, were chilling. The assaults happened in "flop houses" in which mattresses were placed on the floors of locations secured by pimps. The story took the audience inside the child exploitation scene. At the time I had no qualms about including this teenaged girl as my source. She was, after all, willing to be the "face" of the story. She was also encouraged to participate by a local police vice unit and a service agency that advocated for former sex trade workers. Both agencies appeared supportive of her as she tried to move forward. We protected her identity for ethical and legal reasons. In the months after the story aired, I would occasionally call her. I wanted to see how she was doing, and sometimes called to seek her opinions on developments in the local child exploitation

industry. She eventually asked me to stop calling. I don't remember her exact words. But she no longer wanted to be associated with a story that narrowly defined her as both victim and child prostitute. She needed to move on. Only years later did I contemplate that her inclusion in this high-profile story might have been damaging to her. This teenager was never afforded a clear account of the factors to consider in advance of her participation. Looking back, the one mitigating factor is that my work was not published online. It aired on local television and disappeared into the dusty broadcast archives. Had I produced this story in the last decade, its shelf life would have been much longer.

Not until a few years into teaching did I begin to actively work through questions of source well-being. Others have done a much better job on this front, including former CBC journalist Meredith Levine.[2] She argues in her thesis, "Consent and Consequences: Journalists' Duty to Inform Subjects of Potential Harms" (2010), that journalists – and by extension journalism in general – would be well served by assessing the risk of participation using approaches found in human research ethics models adopted by health and social science researchers. As Levine (2010) writes, it's really about providing sources (in a non-bureaucratic way) with enough information that they can make a good decision about participation.

> In journalism practice, as in much of health and social science research, avoiding unnecessary harm should require first and foremost, disclosure of potential significant negative consequences, and then let the subject decide for herself her course of action. The potential subject in journalism then must be conceived of as not only a person with information to share, but also a person who is herself in need of information. (96)

Levine concludes that it is the journalist's duty to inform vulnerable and inexperienced sources of potential harm; yet there is a deep resistance in the field to doing much beyond clearly identifying oneself as a journalist. This divergence of opinion was captured in a formal discussion paper (English, Enkin, Levine, and Sher 2014) published by the Canadian of Association of Journalists in which Levine, a professor at Western University, argued for significant change in journalists' approach to sources. The remaining panellists – Toronto Star public editor Kathy English, CBC ombudsman Esther Enkin, and Julian Sher, senior producer for CBC's the fifth estate – largely defended the status quo of clearly identifying oneself as a journalist, although they also supported developing more training and asking more questions around the issue of vulnerable sources.

Such training often falls to the journalism educator (and so it should). Problems arise, however, when we aren't able to step back from some of our deeply ingrained practices. It wasn't that long ago that I routinely instructed students that all they needed to say (to their sources) was that they were reporting for our publication. In recent years, however, several colleagues and I have worked much harder to provide our student journalists with clearer ways to more fully inform sources. One is through a detailed electronic e-mail signature that identifies our students as reporters, identifies our publication as both print and online, and explains the publication's relationship to the university. These are small changes that probably don't go far enough to inform inexperienced sources about the possible impacts of participation. Should we not also be talking to sources about the indelible nature of online publishing? Online stories are easy to search, cache, and share. Online stories are also easy to incorporate into new works by people who have no connection to the original sources or context. Online stories have no expiry dates. Many of us may not be spending enough time educating our students or our sources about the impacts of the extended shelf life of journalism content. That said, if we were to coach journalists into entering prolonged conversations with sources about the possible benefits and drawbacks of participation, we could witness the collapse – at least temporarily – of many fine reporting projects, although in her thesis and in the CAJ discussion paper, Levine suggests there is no evidence to support this concern. Furthermore, in an era during which journalists are already struggling to access information (captured by my colleague Sean Holman's work on freedom of information in Canada: visit http://seanholman.com/), what would happen if they were required to develop a detailed consent form each time they approached someone for an interview? This uncertainty should not interfere with giving our students more explicit instruction about the need for transparency when obtaining consent from sources, who, after all, are the lifeblood of our work. The challenge will be whether we can collectively dissect some of our past thinking about sources in an effort to do better as we move forward.

Critical Thinking in the J-Curriculum
Another related area of concern is how our industry-driven experiences can lead to problems in the ways we conceive and teach critical thinking in journalism education. We are in the university. Through our mission statements, mandates, program descriptions, and course descriptions, and even through assignments, we say we want our students to become critical thinkers. Yet even the definition of critical thinking is deeply contested, with scholars reminding us that conceptions of critical thinking are rarely agreed upon and are also deeply influenced by academics' epistemological beliefs (Petress 2004; Pithers & Soden 2000; Geng 2014). Geng's analysis of sixty-four definitions of critical thinking found eight common elements: "judgment, argument, questioning, information processing, problem solving, metacognition, skill and disposition" (127). My concern is that in journalism education, we may at times

fail to adequately name and weave these elements into our students' everyday learning. Reasons for this may include the habits of mind we developed as news workers, so that we now conflate critical thinking with asking tough questions, or taking a narrowly sceptical view to our reporting endeavours. This narrow approach may explain why some journalism educators resist the explicit teaching of critical thinking. Geisler highlights part of the problem in her column for the Poynter Institute, written in 2005 and updated in 2014.

> Newsroom managers tell me they want the journalists on their teams to use better "critical thinking skills." My question is: just what do they really mean by that? For some, it means being skeptical – the time-honored school of "If your mother says she loves you, check it out." That's a start at critical thinking. For other news managers, I fear it simply means: "Have the ability to read my mind and know exactly how I would do the story." That's pretty much the end of critical thinking. It is just emulation.

Taking a questioning stance in journalism practice is, as Geisler suggests, a good starting point. Those of us who have engaged in complex journalism endeavours, such as producing documentaries, authoring books, managing newsrooms, and conducting major investigations, have most certainly gone further – engaging in an intricate array of mental manoeuvring that goes far beyond asking questions. Perhaps the bigger issue is that as journalism professors, we don't always clearly break down for our students how we learned or activated such critical thinking skills in the field. Some of us may not even know, at least in explicit terms, how we developed and carried out the mental moves that served us well. The good news is that for the uninitiated, there is a deep literature in place to help us better incorporate the lessons and language of critical thinking in higher education. An excellent resource is the Foundation for Critical Thinking (www.criticalthinking.org), a US-based not-for-profit that works with individuals and organizations, including universities.

The foundation makes a strong case for "excellence in thought" by first outlining the problem with unexamined thinking:

> Much of our thinking, left to itself, is biased, distorted, partial, uninformed or down-right prejudiced. Yet the quality of our life and that of what we produce, make, or build depends precisely on the quality of our thought. Shoddy thinking is costly, both in money and in quality of life. Excellence in thought, however, must be systematically cultivated. (www.criticalthinking.org/pages/defining-critical-thinking/410)

The Foundation goes on to define critical thinking as

> that mode of thinking – about any subject, content, or problem – in which the thinker improves the quality of his or her thinking by skilfully analyzing, assessing, and reconstructing it. Critical thinking is self-directed, self-disciplined, self-monitored, and self-corrective thinking. It presupposes assent to rigorous standards of excellence and mindful command of their use. It entails effective communication and problem solving abilities, as well as a commitment to overcome our native egocentrism and sociocentrism. (ibid., 411)

This definition makes me wonder to what extent journalism educators are engaging in the type of reflexivity proposed, let alone facilitating this mode of thinking in the classroom. One issue may relate to our habits as practising journalists. Many of us working in daily news environments were focused on deadlines and deliverables. "You're only as good as your last story" was a common refrain that conditioned us to privilege expediency over reflection. I confess that, in the field, my intellectual and even procedural reactions to new ideas sometimes privileged efficiency over depth, he-said-she-said formats over appropriate weighting of conflicting claims, and narrow angles over big-picture thinking. How much stronger would my early journalism have been had I been exposed in my undergraduate training to a practice of intentional critical thinking marked by a more systematic way of managing my assumptions and situatedness in relation to each story? The following reflection from my time as a young journalist offers a view to what I now consider to be flawed thinking:

> I was in my late twenties. It was the early 1990s. A couple invited me into their home where I met their child, who was on the autism spectrum. The parents were excited about "breakthrough" technology they were using to help their non-verbal child communicate. Using an alphabet board, the father as facilitator rested his hand over his child's hand, and began asking questions. After each question, their conjoined hands would float from letter to letter. The father would then translate his child's answers for me. I recall feeling tormented as I continued to watch their hand-on-hand traversing across the board. They struck me as good caring people, genuinely excited and eager to share their story. Yet I was also aware through some preliminary research that this type of facilitated

communication was largely discredited in the scientific community. A growing

number of studies indicated it was the facilitators who were guiding the

movements. Preparing for our first interview, I knew that my questions needed to

end up in the show-me-evidence arena. But my journalism education and training

in the field had prematurely catapulted me into this line of questioning. I hadn't

the maturity or the thinking skills to give myself (and these sources) permission

to explore the rich space of what they were experiencing in their attempts to

communicate with their child. My time was restricted, as was my approach. I

started the interview, quickly demanding proof of their claims. Our conversation

ended abruptly, and I "bailed" on the story. I can only assume that exposure to

more critical thinking training in my undergraduate journalism degree, more

mentoring in my newsroom, and more time to investigate their claims from

multiple standpoints would have led to a better result for all involved.

As a twenty-something journalist, I might have argued that my research into claims about facilitated communication was enough reason to reject the family's belief that their child's communication skills were improving through its use. But I hadn't had the intellectual training for that, nor had I time to step back and ask what else might have been going on in that suburban living room. I never thought to ask to what extent regular touch between parent and child was creating a more conducive environment for communication. What impact had the couple's intensive search for solutions had on the quality of their relationship with their child? What effect did sharing their story with other families and the media have on their ability to hope for their child's future? Mine was then a journalism practice devoid of the multiple perspective-taking we expect of our students today. The problem of course was that I had little formal training in higher-order thinking. I don't recall ever discussing, at least in explicit terms, critical thinking with any producers, colleagues, or journalism professors. Years later, and in a different setting, I'm not convinced much has changed. I hear students complain about professors whose red-inked demands for more evidence of critical thinking rarely contain precise instruction about what they're looking for. The students' complaints are directed not only at us but also at teachers from a cross-section of academic fields. Their complaints leave me searching for ways to effect positive change.

Going Deeper with Critical Thinking Instruction

Infusing our curriculum with more formalized critical thinking instruction is an important part of the solution. But this would require that we decompress our courses, thereby leaving room to build in more opportunities for students to learn and practise the explicit intellectual steps associated with excellence in

thought. This is no easy task, given our backgrounds and our workloads. In practice-based courses, we already devote much time to scrutinizing student projects, including those shared in the public sphere. We help them develop and hone their ideas. We strategize with them about who and what will comprise their investigations. We also carve out time to teach them how to operate specialized equipment and how to engage audiences using ever-expanding platforms. We ensure as best we can that their work is meeting ethical, legal, and editorial standards. It is easy to understand why the journalism teacher might resist adding to her fourteen-week course a deep dive into lessons of explicit critical thinking.

It is also easy to understand why journalism professors might deem adequate some of the extant approaches to teaching journalistic critical thinking. Take for example the good work of Benedetti, Kierans, and Currie, who in their textbook *The New Journalist: Roles, Skills, and Critical Thinking* (2010) unpack important lessons. In their chapter devoted to critical thinking for journalists, Benedetti[3] and Kierans spell out the "basics" through an exploration of three questions: 1. What is being claimed? 2. What is the evidence? 3. Is the person making the claim an authority? (130). These are significant questions that go a long way towards supporting our students as they undertake complex reporting endeavours in fast-paced environments. However, while the chapter offers the student journalist a useful range of ways to think more critically about sources and their claims, it devotes little space to the type of reflexivity proposed by the Foundation for Critical Thinking. To develop that space, we would need to acknowledge the issue of gaps in our expertise. I assume that many journalism professors (myself included) don't consider themselves experts in critical-thinking instruction. Addressing these deficits will require us to develop a far more comprehensive approach to critical thinking in journalism, not to mention deep programmatic and institutional support to put such inquiry in place. A discussion of what this action and support might look like falls outside the scope of this paper, but there are many models in place to support faculty learning, including communities of practice (Wenger 2000), book studies (Medina, Garrison, and Brazeau 2010), and critical thinking learning opportunities (Stedman & Adams 2012).

Some might argue, however, that our students – particularly those in liberal arts institutions – are already receiving more explicit critical thinking training from other professors in disciplines such as philosophy and English. But do we not weaken our programs when we leave questions of how journalists should be "thinking about thinking" to others? The question is not meant to undermine the value of interdisciplinary learning. It does, however, acknowledge that we have not yet developed a coherent view of what we consider to be key knowledge about critical thinking. Part of the issue may relate to our discipline's age – the journalism school established in 1908 in Missouri was among the first in North America (Cushion 2007), while Canada's first university to grant journalism degrees was Carleton (which awarded three Bachelors of Journalism in 1946). When one is part of a "new" academic field, disciplinary

knowledge is subject to intense negotiation, which can lead to much discord. Zelizer's work (2004, 2009) probes these problems of disconnection in our field:

> In that over the years academics have invoked a variety of prisms through which to consider journalism, they have not yet produced a scholarly picture of journalism that combines all of these prisms into a coherent reflection of all that journalism is and could be. Instead, the study of journalism remains incomplete, partial and divided, leaving its practitioners uncertain about what it means to think about journalism, writ broadly. (2009, 30)

Zelizer examines not only the uneasy relationships among journalists, journalism educators, and journalism scholars, but also journalism's uncomfortable fit within the academy. She specifically calls for "a space of reflection, both about the backdrop status of journalism's practice and study and about the degree to which the default assumptions that comprise it correspond with the full picture of contemporary journalism" (2009, 30). These tensions help explain why our attempts to articulate the curricula of tomorrow are riddled with challenges. Shapiro's recent work in *Journalism Studies* (2014) provides an illustrative example of the search for disciplinary coherence as he brings together the very words that define the form and function of what we do.[4] His proposed definition of journalism – which since publication has been amended to include the phrase "or commentary upon" (I. Shapiro, personal communication, spring 2015) – reads: "Journalism comprises the activities involved in an independent pursuit of, or commentary upon, accurate information about current or recent events and its original presentation for public edification" (561). His work, and the works of other journalism scholars – many of whom, like Shapiro, have had careers as journalists – form a growing body of scholarship that needs to be woven through not only our peer-to-peer discussions about the future of journalism education, but also our work with students. This braiding of theory and practice will require ongoing attention, especially from those of us arriving from industry. Through it all, we need to stay committed to interrogating our past experiences as we continue growing into our roles as educators and scholars.

Uncovering Our Blind Spots

There are many ways to conduct such interrogations. I propose two, one of which could help us better understand our roles as teachers/professors, the other, as disciplinary experts. I will begin with the latter, called Decoding the Disciplines, which I first learned about through conference workshops hosted by the International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning. Developed by a group of American scholars, Decoding the Disciplines (hereafter referred to as Decoding) is a process-driven

approach meant to help disciplinary experts surface their tacit knowledge, break it down into steps, model the steps to students, and then provide rich feedback as students practise those steps. The Decoding researchers have developed a seven-step framework, which grew out of work done by a Faculty Learning Community (FLC) at Indiana University.[5] The FLC supported academics from myriad disciplines through intensive ten-day seminars designed to identify and solve "bottlenecks" to student learning. As Middendorf and Pace (2004) explain, the FLC grew from a "strong realization"

> that the mental operations required of undergraduates differ enormously from discipline to discipline, that these ways of thinking are rarely presented to students explicitly, that students generally lack an opportunity to practice and receive feedback on particular skills in isolation from others, and that there is rarely a systematic assessment of the extent to which students have mastered each of the ways of thinking that are essential to particular disciplines. (3)

The Decoding researchers consistently remind us that experts in academic fields tend to have a type of amnesia with respect to their ingrained understandings of how they know what they know in their disciplines. Put another way, these experts – be they biologists, historians, lawyers, or journalists – tend not to remember *how* they have come to know what they consider to be key disciplinary knowledge. At one workshop, the concept was explained in terms of experts passing through a type of portal or wormhole of understanding. Once through, they struggle to remember a time when they did not understand the world from that epistemological view. This buried knowing, which can be deeply problematic for both students and teachers, helps explain why our students sometimes struggle with concepts we consider obvious or innate, such as tracking down sources, or recognizing potential stories.

This "disciplinary unconscious" has the potential to hinder student learning. I came face to face with this realization two years ago, when decoding expert David Pace visited my university to help faculty learn more about decoding. Not long after, I agreed to participate in a research project in which I was decoded by two non-journalist colleagues. That interview was a game-changer. To help illustrate how the method surfaced some of my own ingrained knowledge, I share below a snapshot of my experience, aided by a snippet of the interview transcript. As I prepared for my decoding interview, I was asked to think carefully about a bottleneck to student learning in my classes. My response came quickly – story ideas. For years, I have witnessed students struggle to consistently generate strong journalistic pitches. We show them good work. We provide questions they should address in their pitches. We engage in many conversations with them about audience, story tension, and public interest. We discuss focus, angles, and hooks. Sometimes, in return, we hear them articulate strong ideas. Other times, the ideas are

weak. They lack tension, are poorly researched, are much too big or much too small. When the decoders pushed me to define the bottleneck more clearly, I eventually concluded that it related to pattern recognition – that students struggle to recognize the patterns that are often consistent with strong story ideas. The decoders also asked me many questions about what I did as an "expert" to generate my own story ideas. I was repeatedly asked to describe in detail how I went about the process. This hour-long conversation resulted in some key takeaways, including the degree to which my ideas were usually connected to breaks in established patterns. In other words, issues, events, and people typically appeared on my story radar when they struck me as different from the norm. The decoding experience allowed me to see how quickly and often I had taken away the opportunity for students to identify and practise finding these breaks in patterns.

The decoding exercise was both humbling and disconcerting. As a teacher, I recognized that I had to some degree failed to develop a systematic approach to support students with their story idea development. The following excerpt from my decoding interview transcript illustrates my discomfort in trying to explain to non-journalists what my engagement with good story ideas looks and feels like:

Interviewer: And what does that engagement look like?

Sally: [pause] I don't know! Emotionally engaging story idea? [pause] Well, I mean on a first level it is just excitement, I am excited by the idea. I am kind of excited by the notion of, "A-ha! There is something here we are going to bring out, that we are going to surface that has potentially not been surfaced before," so that idea, the big reveal, you know?

Interviewer: So you are excited by that angle of newness?

Sally: Yes … I get excited too when the story doesn't fit what we consider to be a pattern of a predictable story arc.

Decoding (and being decoded) is time-consuming and difficult work. When my interview concluded, I was exhausted. I was also excited about examining my expertise to better assist my students in their learning. At the same time, I felt vulnerable, even embarrassed, because after years of teaching, there I was, struggling to explain a core concept. Middendorf and Pace's seven-step model (2004, 4–10) begins with the essential work of identifying the bottleneck to student learning. On that front, I made some progress during the interview. I have also made some progress on Step 2, addressing how the expert "does these things." Step 3 identifies how these steps can be modelled. While I have begun to think more deeply about how I could model story pitching, I have made less headway in steps four through seven, described by Middendorf and Pace in the form of questions.

Step 4: How will students practise these skills and get feedback?

Step 5: What will motivate the students?

Step 6: How well are students mastering these learning tasks?

Step 7: How can the resulting knowledge about learning be shared?

I have much work left to do on the decoding front. But it is exactly this type of introspective work that I believe will help us improve our teaching *and* student learning in journalism education. The Decoding researchers invite us to probe our expertise and provide a model to begin such work. Similarly, critical thinking scholars invite us to access rich resources located not only in the scholarly literature but also in repositories such as the one overseen by the Foundation for Critical Thinking. I will conclude with a brief review of one such resource – a framework proposed by Barbara Larrivee that could help former journalists become more critically reflective teachers.

We require of our students a great deal of reflection. We tell them that a reflective approach to learning brings deep and lasting gains. Yet few journalist-educators model reflective practice. Larrivee (2000) and others (e.g., Brookfield, 1995) invite us into this practice by identifying and challenging our existing beliefs and assumptions so that we face what Larrivee describes as our "deeply rooted personal attitudes concerning human nature, human potential, and human learning. Reflective practitioners challenge assumptions and question existing practices, thereby continuously accessing new lens to view their practice and alter their perspectives" (296). Yet existing practices are hard to let go. Consider, for example, many journalism educators' proclivity for familiar formats. Like old sweaters, these formats are comforting, and we assume they are effective. The television producer wraps himself in the documentary, the broadcast journalist in her ninety-second package, the magazine writer in his long-form narrative, the wire service reporter in his razor-sharp headline and lead. Many of us were hired because we had mastered specific formats and related practices. But our proclivity for these familiar ways of doing (and thinking) can impede clear thinking about what journalism education should look like. One can never argue that specialized expertise is a bad thing. But by rigidly embedding our expertise in assignments, classrooms, courses, and specializations, we may be limiting student journalists' opportunities to make informed choices that support excellence in journalistic thinking.

Larrivee proposes a framework that could help us structure some of the conversations and work we need to undertake as we chart new territory in journalism education. But this type of work can entail significant emotional and cognitive upheaval, which is why she and others stress the need for creating safe and respectful arenas in which we can wrestle with our closely held assumptions. Larrivee offers a way to visualize the stages involved in developing a critical reflective practice, although she suggests that

the process is more circular than linear. The first stage is one of examination, where the teacher analyses any behaviour or action with the goal of determining whether it's getting the desired result (304). A personal example is my habit of conducting fast, *efficient* story meetings with my senior students. I have told myself that students appreciate my approach to hearing their ideas and helping them quickly set those ideas in motion. But I can see problems with this approach. Larrivee describes the second stage of developing a reflective practice as the toughest one, marked by chaos and fear. This stage sees the teacher wrestle with letting go of the familiar (yet counterproductive) behaviour or action. Larrivee suggests that in this "struggle stage" (305), it's easy to abandon the change we are trying to make as we cling to our familiar ways of doing things. But she encourages us to weather the storm (305), for the uncertainty and chaos will eventually pass. The next stage is marked by "perceptual shift" (305) and sees us reconcile our shifting views and ultimately change our practice. Only after we have changed our practice do we engage in reflective work that is transformative (306). None of this work should be undertaken alone. We require one another's support as we conduct such personal inquiries, and this can leave us feeling isolated and vulnerable. This is why many reflective practitioners develop spaces to do some of this work together.

Final Words

I have been teaching journalism since 2003. When I began this work in a college setting, few journalism instructors were talking about reflective practice, unexamined thinking, disciplinary knowing, or the careful braiding of theory and practice. Things are changing. Through my college's transformation into a university, through support from numerous scholars, and through my immersion in the scholarship of teaching and learning, I am beginning to envision journalism education differently. In doing so, I hope I am avoiding the kind of auto-pilot thinking and doing that inevitably hinders student learning. I also hope this paper will spark some ideas about how we might better investigate our experiences as teachers and former journalists. I propose that we actively search for models and frameworks that will help us dissect not only our shortcomings in the classroom but also how some of those shortcomings are linked to the unexamined ways in which we carried out our work as journalists.

NOTES

[1] For Picard's essay, see pages 4-10 in this volume.

[2] For Levine's contribution to this volume, see pages 85-93.

[3] For Benedetti's contribution to this volume, see pages 94-104.

[4] For Shapiro's contribution to this volume, see pp 11-27.

[5] The 7-step framework is described at http://www.decodingthedisciplines.org/about.html

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