

Benefits of the project model capstone

Key experience themes for journalism students

Abstract: Capstone units are culminating experiences typically offered in the final semester of a tertiary degree. Capstones are common across higher education and are increasingly being offered in university journalism programmes. However, there is no consensus about the most effective capstone for journalism. At least three models have been identified: the project, the newsroom simulation and the internship. While traditionally popular, the newsroom simulation and internship models have certain limitations. Some of these have become more pronounced during the COVID-19 pandemic. Journalism educators see merit in the project model, but it is not widely used. To date, there has been a lack of research about how journalism students respond to the various capstone options. The study presented here makes a contribution to this field by describing graduating students' feedback about a new project model capstone unit offered through an Australian journalism undergraduate programme. It describes some of the key themes to emerge from survey responses gathered over three years. The project experience was found to enhance both tradecraft and transferable life skills and helped many students feel more prepared to enter the workforce. The project shows significant promise as a valid alternative capstone experience for journalism students.

Keywords: Australia, capstone unit, COVID-19, employability, employment, internships, journalism education, life skills, project journalism, soft skills

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Introduction

CAPSTONES are substantial learning experiences that take place in the final stage of an educational course. Also known as senior seminars, they are common across undergraduate and graduate courses, with 70-80 per cent of higher education institutions in the US offering them (Apgar, 2019). Capstones are culminating experiences that give students the context in which to integrate and apply prior learning. They provide depth and complexity,

engender independence and confidence and orient and assist in transition to life after graduation. They are special, significant and challenging. Capstones have been identified as high impact educational experiences for college students (Kuh, 2008). Increasingly, they are also conceptualised as the key location for identifying whether students can demonstrate the achievement of many, if not all, degree programme learning outcomes (Lee & Loton, 2015).

Capstones are generally adapted to meet the specific needs of graduating students and can vary significantly across disciplines. Researchers have noted a lack of uniformity in quality and design (Apgar, 2019; Lee & Loton, 2019). However, some universal purposes have been proposed. These include integration and synthesis of knowledge and skills acquired to date, including giving students the opportunity to apply their skills through authentic work experience; facilitation of transition from university to professional working life; reflection on what has been learned including identifying personal strengths; and providing closure through a culminating experience that recognises accomplishments and draws together various aspects of learning (Thomas, Wong & Li, 2014).

While there is a strong focus on enhancing employability, capstone experiences should not be confined to developing discipline-specific skills. Various researchers (Bennett, 2019; Cullen, 2017; Ivison, 2015; Succi & Canovi, 2020) have argued that more generic, transferable life skills or soft skills such as problem-solving, teamwork, communication, capacity for lifelong learning, creativity, adaptability, resilience and confidence are just as crucial for graduates entering an increasingly complex and dynamic workplace. If we are to educate for employability (growing abilities) rather than employment (securing a job), then the concern for educators is to move beyond graduate employment to focus on the development of graduates who are prepared to meet the demands of life and work well beyond their discipline (Shine & Cullen, 2019).

In Australia, three capstone models have been identified among undergraduate journalism programmes: professional placement (usually known as an internship), newsroom simulations and projects. The internship is the most common. While most educators see merit in the project model, it is not widely used (Cullen, 2017).

To date, there has been a lack of research about how journalism students respond to the various capstone options. The study presented here contributes to the literature by describing graduating students' feedback about a new project model capstone unit introduced into the undergraduate journalism programme at Curtin University in Western Australia. It describes some of the key themes to emerge from survey responses from three cohorts of graduating students. It also outlines students' responses to other journalism capstone experiences.

Literature review

Six common capstone models have been identified across disciplines: externally oriented projects; academic inquiry projects; practice-oriented simulations; practice-based consultancies; task-oriented simulation and professional placement (Lee, 2015). Reviews of the capstone literature have found that the two project models are dominant (Hauhart & Grahe, 2015) and are said to comprise up to 85 percent of all capstones (Lee & Loton, 2015). Externally oriented projects, also known as problem-based projects, typically give students the opportunity to engage in a professional project whereby they develop a solution for an external client, who may be real or imaginary. Assessments usually take the form of presentations and reports which may be delivered to the client. Academic inquiry projects may take the form of a major creative or professional project or a substantial research dissertation (Lee, 2015).

In Australia, capstone units are regularly used to transition graduating students from university to professional life with appropriate knowledge and skills (Cullen, 2017). About two thirds of the 30 universities in Australia that teach journalism use at least one journalism capstone unit in their undergraduate programmes. These facts emerged from the findings of an 18-month study that reviewed undergraduate capstone units embedded in journalism degrees and majors in Australian universities (Cullen, 2016). The research involved face-to-face interviews with 30 journalism academics at 18 universities in five states, to discover what types of capstone units they used, the principles they employed, and the skills students needed to be able to demonstrate and apply. Most journalism educators in the study reported the use of one and often two (and sometimes three) types of capstone unit. The internship was the most popular, followed by newsroom simulation and then a project (Cullen, 2016). A more recent review of the units offered at Australian undergraduate tertiary journalism courses conducted by the author in 2023 confirmed that the internship remains the most popular capstone option. However, it appears that the project model is increasingly being adopted. Of the 25 Australian journalism courses identified, 10 offered a project capstone. The project unit was often offered in conjunction with either a placement or newsroom simulation unit.

According to the journalism educators interviewed for the Cullen (2016) study, the internship unit usually consisted of a placement at a media outlet. This involved consultation with the journalism coordinator about the suitability of the placement. One of the limitations of this model was that less competent students often struggled to cope with the demands of industry newsrooms (Cullen, 2016). High-performing students were often selected for these internships, but they were not always available to average or under-performing students. Several educators argued against using an internship as the only capstone unit as adequate supervision and mentoring were not always provided in the news-

room. Frequent discussions with students before, during and after the internship usually provided the most productive outcomes and experience (Cullen, 2016). Journalism educators have reported that internships were problematic for testing graduate capabilities as they were decreasing in number. Participating students did not necessarily have the required skills and regularly reported that they were restricted to performing menial tasks in the newsroom (Tanner, Green, Cullen & O'Donnell, 2013; Zheng & Bluestein, 2021). More recent research has also pointed to various limitations of the internship model including equity, quality and access issues (Hora, Chen, Parrott & Her, 2020; Valencia-Forrester, 2020). Furthermore, access to internships has become even more restricted since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic (Gill, 2020) which has seen a significant increase in people working from home, including those in news media. This, coupled with a reluctance to put staff or visiting students at risk of contracting COVID, has made securing internships across a range of industries more difficult.

The newsroom simulation capstone was popular with educators in the Cullen (2016) study as it allowed students to demonstrate what they had learned during their undergraduate course. In this capstone, students assumed different editorial and reporting roles and created a portfolio of published work. According to educators, the newsroom simulation capstone encouraged students to think and act like journalists and helped them to develop a more confident and professional approach to their work. This model also allowed educators to identify gaps in their learning. However, newsroom simulation units can be difficult to implement within the parameters of conventional tertiary learning activities. The Cullen (2016) study reported that only one of the Australian journalism programmes was able to offer its newsroom simulation unit as a whole day class, once a week. The newsroom model also tended to require intensive, hands-on supervision and ongoing interactions between staff and students throughout the class. Unlike more traditional tutorial-based learning, it is not well-suited to online delivery, a disadvantage that became increasingly problematic during the pandemic as many tertiary programs had to shift to fully online teaching.

The third type of journalism capstone unit involved a project, in which students covered an event or a local social or political issue to produce a substantial piece of journalism (Cullen, 2016). Generally, this involved students practising a wide range of journalistic skills including interviewing, research, writing, editing and meeting production deadlines. One advantage of the project over other capstone models is its versatility, which makes it particularly well-suited for journalism education. This was noted by Glitsos (2021) who proposed that the project model could be modified to provide an international focus to encourage journalism students to foster connections with media professionals and organisations beyond Australia.

Reflective practice is considered a key part of the project capstone model as

it is through reflection that students become more aware of and intentional about their own professional identities. Furthermore, reflective practice enables both personal and professional development by encouraging individuals to consider contexts, themselves and their roles (Cullen, 2016). It contributes to the acquisition and development of higher-order cognitive skills such as critical thinking (Hovorka, 2009). Although the project was not widely used, educators in the Cullen (2016) study saw potential in the model, particularly in the opportunity it provided for extended research and analysis.

The unit

This section describes the introduction of a capstone project unit at Curtin University in Western Australia. The Journalism Major Project is the culmination of the three-year journalism undergraduate degree, in which students apply the skills and knowledge learned over the course of their studies to produce a substantial long form journalism project or body of work. The unit was designed to allow students to use and enhance their journalism disciplinary skills, but it also aims to develop lifelong, transferable learning abilities and traits. The section below provides more information about the unit, followed by key findings from a survey, conducted over three years consecutive years (2018-2020), that asked students about their experiences of the project capstone.

Unit development was guided by the capstone principles articulated by Lee & Loton (2015, p. v) as part of a report on capstone curriculum across disciplines prepared for the Australian Government's Office for Learning and Teaching:

1. Integration and extension of prior learning.
2. Authentic and contextualised experiences.
3. Challenging and complex scenarios.
4. Student independence and agency.
5. A concern with critical inquiry and creativity.
6. Active dissemination and celebration.

Unit design was influenced by research (Funston & Lee, 2014; Schwering, 2015) that has pointed to the advantages of the project model capstone. A critical element of the project model is the concept of ownership. Students should feel that the project is entirely theirs—from conception to submission. Implicit in this approach is a focus on autonomy and independence. For this reason, a decision was made to allow flexibility around what a project might entail. The students were told that their project must be multimedia and should include input from a minimum of four sources. It was up to them to choose a topic and decide how to report on and present the story.

It was important that the assessment weighting reflected the expected workload associated with the project, so this was set at 60 percent, and the project was due for submission at the end of the penultimate week of semester. However, there

was also a need to ensure that students had a clear idea of what they planned to do for their project within a few weeks of the start of semester. Hence, a presentation assessment worth 20 percent was included. For this assessment, students presented to peers and their tutor a detailed proposal for their project around four-six weeks into semester. As reflective practice is another important element of the capstone approach, a reflective essay, also worth 20 percent, comprised the final piece of assessment. The unit learning outcomes below outline what students are expected to do to successfully complete the unit:

1. Evaluate a variety of sources in order to identify and explore a focus for the project.
2. Gauge potential of the project, in terms of its feasibility and originality, and subsequently advocate its worth to audiences and publishers.
3. Produce a substantial piece of journalism that complies with legal, ethical and professional standards, and synthesises complex ideas and information.
4. Critically explain and justify approach to production process, reflecting upon challenges and opportunities presented.

The unit comprises a three-hour weekly seminar/workshop. To date, the unit has been taught in-person, although it does have the potential to be delivered online as will be discussed in more detail later. At the start of the semester, the students enrolled in the project unit are introduced to the idea of a major project and are shown multiple examples of projects within journalism. These range from prize-winning multimedia international stories to projects produced by other students, as well as examples of prize-winning work from the Ossia (Australian Student Journalism) Awards. To give students more guidance around the process of producing a major piece of journalism, local journalists join a few classes each year to share their experiences and advice. These sessions focus on producing long form multimedia journalism.

In week one, students are formed into small groups of four to five people to work together throughout the semester to discuss their ideas and deal with issues that may arise. These groups play a particularly important function during weeks two to four as students identify a topic for their project. Topic ideas are confirmed after consultation with teaching staff. Students present their project proposals to staff and their peers in weeks four to six. During the remainder of the semester, the unit includes some structured teaching each week on topics such as writing, producing infographics, editing, design and layout. Students are expected to draw on the skills and knowledge acquired over the course of their journalism degree. Students are also given time to work on their projects in class and seek feedback from staff and other students. The intention is to create a newsroom style and a collaborative environment in which the teaching staff provide guidance, but let the students take ownership of, and responsibility for,

their projects. The projects are submitted in the penultimate week of the semester so that the final class can include a review of the semester and a showcase of some of the best projects. All the projects are considered for publication on the programme's news website and the best of the work is displayed as part of an annual networking event with industry representatives. These elements align with the capstone principle of active dissemination and celebration.

Results

Week	Content and activities	Assessment
1	Introduction to project-style reporting including professional and student examples. Form student 'support' groups	
2	Workshop from industry guest/ guests with long-form reporting expertise. Research potential ideas.	
3	Advanced research and interviewing skills workshop. Students finalise project ideas and seek tutor approval to proceed.	
4-6	Students present project proposals and receive feedback from staff and peers.	Presentations due
7	Producing longform video and audio workshop	
8	Data journalism and infographics workshop.	
9	Longform writing workshop.	
9	Editing, layout and design.	
10	Drafts due for staff and peer feedback.	
11	Final review of stories including all multimedia aspects.	Projects due end of week
12	Class review of finished projects. The best projects are displayed at an Industry Showcase event a few weeks later.	Reflection due

Students were asked to complete a questionnaire via a Survey Monkey link at the start of the semester and again in the last week of semester, after the projects had been submitted. Each survey comprised 10 questions. To encourage candid responses, the student responses were anonymous. The answers elicited both quantitative and qualitative data. The project was approved by the university's Human

Research Ethics Committee. All participants received an information sheet, and signed a consent form, before completing the survey. Of the 35 students enrolled in the first year of the project unit, 26 completed the first survey and 16 completed the second survey. In the second year, 31 of 44 students completed the first survey and 18 the second. In 2020, 25 of 33 completed the first survey and 12 the second. In total, 112 students enrolled in the unit over the course of three years. Of those, 81 (72 percent) completed the first survey and 46 (41 percent) completed the second survey. It was unfortunate, but not unexpected, that the number of participants was not as high for the second survey. As most educators know, it can be difficult to get students to provide formal feedback, particularly at the end of semester when they often have a high assessment workload.

For the first survey, the students were asked about their expectations of the unit, what specific journalism skills they wanted to improve through completing a major project, their experience of previous journalism units and their sense of preparedness to enter the workforce. For the later survey, the students were asked about their experience of producing the major project and again about their preparedness to start their careers. They were asked about the skills they had developed throughout the process of producing their project and what they considered to be the best aspect/s of the unit overall. They were also asked to compare the project unit to other final-year units within the journalism major, including an internship unit and a newsroom simulation unit.

When asked to nominate their preferred capstone unit, the project unit was the most popular choice (37 percent), followed by the internship unit (33 percent) and newsroom simulation (30 percent). Although the project unit was well-received, many students mentioned the value of these other journalism capstone models. A high number of students said the three units offered distinct, discrete benefits for student learning and that they complemented each other. The project unit proved popular with students from the outset and support for the unit grew. When asked whether they thought the unit should be a compulsory unit within the journalism major, 90 percent of the first group of students said 'yes'. By the third year, that percentage increased to 100 percent. Overall, the students' responses pointed to the value of the project capstone in enhancing both tradecraft and transferable life skills. An analysis of the qualitative responses identified certain dominant themes regarding skills and abilities acquired. These are outlined below, with supporting qualitative comments from students.

Independence

Over the three years, students' responses consistently demonstrated their appreciation of the project capstone's focus on ownership and the independence it fostered. To have control over the project from conception to completion was motivating for many:

Being given the opportunity to choose my own topic was an integral part of the project for me. I was genuinely interested in what I was researching, which ultimately resulted in working to the highest standard possible.

Numerous students reported they had to be disciplined and organised to work to a long deadline, without the same level of staff input they had experienced in previous units:

The independence and freedom in this unit was a great opportunity in many respects including developing ideas, gathering research and working through our individual processes of creating the project. Working independently compelled us to be responsible for our work and organisation as well as allowing us to develop our planning and time management skills.

Some of the students were initially apprehensive about their ability to produce a major project. The ownership that motivated most of the students had the opposite effect on others. Some reported feeling overwhelmed by having to make all the decisions and the responsibility that came with taking the lead. However, most said they felt ready to tackle a substantial topic of their own choosing after working on relatively short news stories, with a high degree of staff supervision, for most of their degrees. Taking ownership of a project signaled a significant step forward and fact that most students were willing to do so suggests this was an appropriate method of transition.

Interviewing

Each year, a high proportion of students surveyed (more than 80 percent) nominated interviewing as the main journalism tradecraft skill they had developed or improved while completing the project unit. Many said this was due to having more time to find sources and to prepare for and conduct interviews:

I was able to conduct far longer and more in-depth interviews than I had previously, and through each of them I was able to put into practice skills I hadn't yet mastered in my degree. The first of those was learning to listen. This was really the first time that I actually thought I needed to stop being so formal with my questioning and sit and listen to what they were saying.

More than half of the students surveyed nominated long form writing as a skill they had developed through completing the project unit. Many of those said this was due to acquiring a better understanding of how to structure stories including what to include and what to omit. Other tradecraft skills developed included advanced researching, video and photo editing, creating graphics, audio production, sub editing and design and layout.

Persistence

Some of the skills/traits most frequently nominated by students were life skills and journalism skills. For example, a high proportion of students said they had learned to be more persistent, a trait that is highly valued in reporters. They regularly described having to make repeat approaches to potential sources for interviews and having to re-adjust when interviews and other arrangements did not go to plan:

It's really about persistence and being adaptable at all times. Sometimes your story will start in one place and then evolve as contacts arise or don't arise. It's your job to find a new angle and connect it to your original goal.

Because they had so much more time to work on the project than they would on a standard news story, they realised they had to keep identifying possible sources and contacting people. They could not use the excuse that they had run out of time. Most of them discovered that there was usually a feasible solution to almost any hurdle encountered.

Collegiality

Although all the students were working on individual projects, a significant proportion of the survey responses mentioned the high degree of collegiality and camaraderie they experienced with their peers. The intention to provide a newsroom-style environment in which students were encouraged to share their ideas and discuss their work with their peers was shown to have clear benefits:

Communicating with classmates became a huge part of the unit. I feel like I went to classmates more than tutors for guidance as we were all going through the same things and were able to help each other out. I think putting it on us to work through things by ourselves was a hugely beneficial part of the unit.

This collegiality was particularly evident in the final cohort of students who set up a messaging group that included every student in the unit. This was done without any direction from staff, but proved so valuable that it is now recommended every year. The students messaged each other through the semester, working through ideas for stories, sources and support, making them less reliant on staff input. This outcome reinforced the value of the project experience in terms of providing an effective transition from university to the newsroom, where collegiality is a critical element of journalism practice.

Preparedness

The students were asked in each survey about their preparedness to enter the

workforce. Every year there was a significant increase in the proportion of students who felt prepared to start their careers from when they started to after they had completed the unit. In the first cohort of students, the number of students who felt prepared jumped from 27 percent at the start of the semester to 50 percent by the end. In year two, the percentage increased from 45 percent to 67 percent and in year three the percentage went from 37 percent to 83 percent. Qualitative responses suggest this shift in attitude could be attributed to students' perceiving the process of producing a major journalism project as an authentic workplace experience:

I really had what I would define as a career-starting experience, working out the process of being a journalist and calling on every skill I've learned at university to get me over the line.

It felt like the closest experience to actually being in the industry and allowed us to tackle obstacles independently.

Having the opportunity to drive a challenging, substantial project and work like a professional journalist gave many students a confidence boost that made them feel more ready to start their careers.

I was able to improve my long form writing, my interviewing skills, researching capabilities, photography and video creation. Most importantly, though, I am now confident that I can be a proficient journalist, thanks to this unit.

Confidence

As previously mentioned, a high proportion of students appreciated the opportunity to take ownership of their project from the idea through to completion and that this experience gave them confidence in their abilities. Across the survey responses, confidence was one of the most prevalent skill/traits identified. The process of initiating, overseeing and producing a major piece of journalism and overcoming the ensuing obstacles and challenges instilled in many of the students a sense that they could graduate from university and succeed as a professional journalist:

This unit has also taught me to have more faith in my own abilities; something I have always struggled with.

Journalism Major Project has made me feel more confident and prepared for life after graduation than any other unit in my entire degree. Looking ahead to life after graduation, I am filled with both excitement and caution. But now, mostly due to this unit, I am now filled with a sense of pride and confidence that I too can go forth and change the world—one story at a time.

Conclusion

The findings from this three-year survey suggest the project model capstone can achieve the dual aims of enhancing tradecraft skills and developing broader transferable abilities in graduating journalism students. Through the process of producing a major journalism project many students honed disciplinary skills such as interviewing and writing as well as developing sought-after life traits, including persistence, confidence, adaptability and effective time-management. The experience of completing the unit made the students more employable through the application and extension of journalism skills, while also enhancing employability through the development of life skills and abilities. Student responses suggest the unit fulfils the aims of a successful capstone as outlined by Thomas, Wong and Li (2014) in that it allows for the integration and synthesis of knowledge and skills, offers an authentic work experience and provides a sense of closure and accomplishment. Significant increases in the sense of preparedness to start their career reported by the participating students confirm the unit offers an effective transition from university to professional life.

Journalism Major Project has been extremely well-received by students as evidenced by the fact that 90-100 percent of those surveyed agreed it should be a compulsory third year unit. Nevertheless, the unit does have certain limitations. Unlike an internship or a newsroom simulation unit, the project capstone does not prepare students to produce news stories to tight daily deadlines, as most journalists in entry-level jobs are expected to do. This was noted by several students surveyed, some of whom said that being given so much time to work on a piece of journalism felt like a luxury that would not be replicated in the workplace. While that may be true, there is still considerable benefit in producing journalism of this nature. It may be the only chance aspiring journalists get to concentrate their efforts on high quality, long form journalism for some time. A project is also a valuable addition to a portfolio which is likely to be dominated by news stories. Several students noted in their survey responses that working to a long deadline required a different level of discipline and motivation.

Despite the popularity of the project unit, a significant number of students surveyed considered either the newsroom simulation or the internship unit to be the most appropriate culminating unit for a journalism major. These units were more aligned with their perceptions of entry-level journalism. This paper does not dispute the value of these more traditional capstone experiences. Ideally, a journalism course would have the resources and capacity to offer all three. However, that is not always be possible. Furthermore, the internship and newsroom simulation models have certain limitations (Hora et al, 2020; Shine & Cullen, 2019; Valencia-Forrester, 2020). As some of these have become more pronounced since the COVID-19 pandemic, it makes sense to consider other capstone alternatives for journalism.

Unlike the internship unit, the project capstone is not dependent on external media outlets offering student placements. The project unit is suitable for students of all abilities and all students have access to the same supervision and mentoring from teaching staff. It offers more flexibility in terms of teaching delivery than the newsroom simulation model and is less time and resource intensive. It has the potential to be delivered online as it adheres to a conventional tutorial format and encourages students to work independently. Collegiality among students could still be encouraged via the use of messaging apps and breakout groups in online classes.

This research involved a relatively small group of students from one university. Nevertheless, the rare, detailed student feedback provides a valuable contribution to the tertiary capstone literature and to the emerging body of research about capstone units in journalism education. This study highlights the benefits of the project model for graduating journalism students and argues that the project is an appropriate capstone option for our discipline. If journalism programmes are not able to offer internships or newsroom simulations, the project model is a promising alternative that can achieve the key objectives of a successful university capstone experience.

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