

Issues arising from HOTcopy pilot evaluation activities: First year students' experience of the HOTcopy scenario 'First Few Pars'

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Executive summary

During Semester one 2002, an evaluation plan was developed to evaluate the design, use and impacts of HOTcopy across the Journalism program. Several data gathering activities and schedules were detailed in the plan. However, particular circumstances in the Faculty of Arts affected the implementation of the plan resulting in data being gathered from only a small number of students.

Results in this report should therefore be read in light of the following:

- It should be regarded as reporting on a pilot evaluation activity.
- Respondents were all first year students.
- All but two were majoring in PR, not Journalism.
- No feedback was received from off-campus students.
- Feedback relates to only one scenario, 'First few Pars'.

The survey instrument was structured according to key questions that focused on the following:

- Engaging students attention
- The ways students used the scenarios.
- The nature of the pressures experienced by students
- What students believed they learnt by using HOTcopy.
- Navigational and technical matters.

It is essential that further evaluation be carried out to validate the findings reported here about this pilot and to ensure they are more representative of the total cohort. For a project such as HOTcopy, evaluation data is required from a broader range of students studying at each year level and covering each scenario. It is particularly important that feedback be gathered from students majoring in journalism and students studying off-campus.

1. Context

Prior to Semester one 2002, Version 1 of the HOTcopy CD-ROM (containing 3 scenarios) was mailed to all undergraduate and postgraduate Journalism students studying off-campus. This included 10 first year students studying ALJ111 Contemporary Journalism. Four members of staff via 9 tutorial groups plus the off-campus cohort conduct this first year unit in first semester. The first and simplest scenario 'First Few Pars' relates specifically to this unit. As HOTcopy had not been prescribed in time through course information, on-campus students were not required to purchase HOTcopy from the campus bookshop. The decision was made by staff to initially conduct a pilot involving approximately 10 on-campus students and 10 off-campus students.

A questionnaire instrument was developed for use with any of the scenarios. Some questions emerged from experience during the usability testing stage of the project. The pilot questionnaire was made available online via the HOTcopy website and in hard copy. While some on-campus students in computer labs were able to use the on-line questionnaire, it was later discovered that access was denied off-campus students because of a technical error. This pilot therefore involved only a pilot group of on-campus students. The questionnaire asked some 50 questions addressing the following main question categories.

Question Categories:	Number of questions:
1. How well did HOTcopy engage your attention and action?	10
2. What did you do during the scenario?	16
3. What were the pressures you experienced?	11
4. What do you think about the simulated workplace?	3
5. What do you think you learned from HOTcopy?	2
6. How would you choose to use HOTcopy?	1
7. What did you think of the processes in HOTcopy?	8

2. Evaluation Activities

1. Observation of 7 students (5 females and 2 males) as they worked through the first HOTcopy scenario 'First few Pars'. The session was conducted in the Journalism laboratories during a scheduled two-hour tutorial. This group was reasonably representative of the total cohort.
2. Focus group discussion with the same 7 students about their experience.

3. The survey was eventually disseminated to a pilot group of 20 on-campus students – 15 responses were received. (Refer to previous comments about off-campus students.) The majority of respondents were majoring in Public Relations rather than Journalism.

3. Evaluation Findings

3.1 Engaging students' attention

HOTcopy was seen by students to be highly or moderately valuable for engaging attention and prompting action. It was successful in persuading about a third of the students to be *very* attentive to elements of the environment and committed to the task. As one mentioned:

I found myself reacting realistically to the simulation – I did go ‘What!’ when someone rang up with a comment.

Most tended to be *moderately* motivated, committed and immersed. Interactive elements that created the sense of being in a real workplace were rated highly by about half the students and deemed moderately valuable by most others. The interactive elements most likely to be rated *highly valuable* were: (1) the chance to select answers to questions and receive text-based comments of a likely outcome, and (2) being able to take action in response to characters speaking directly to users. Using the phone and being able to type stories was more likely to be rated *moderately valuable*.

3.2 What students did during the scenario

The newsroom tour

During the scenario, all but 2 students did the newsroom tour: half found it very useful and half found it somewhat useful. There were some conflicting views about it in the sense that one or two thought it was too slow and another thought it was not slow enough! Most felt that instructions were explained thoroughly though a few students expected *important information to be shown on the TV or radio*. (This is the case with other more complex scenarios.) There appeared to be a conflict between the advice in the tour and what's possible with the TV. One student suggested: *...you need to be able to turn the volume up on the TV to check its relevance.*

Use of the textual source material

Almost all students used pen and paper for notetaking as they read through the media release. Most summarised the main points of the story, some wrote down quotes, and some noted possible story angles. Only one student actually used an online story window for notetaking

rather than pen and paper. One took detailed notes because he thought the media release may not be accessible after reading time.

A few students mentioned they expected information to come from the TV and telephone, so were attending to them while trying to write their story and were somewhat frustrated when no information was presented. (This does occur in other scenarios.) Others were irritated when the sub editor appeared because his attitude added to the stress they were feeling.

3.3 Pressures experienced

Almost all students felt pressured during the HOTcopy experience. In particular they experienced more real pressures when completing the HOTcopy scenario than they experienced when completing a writing task in class. The pressures related mostly to the *time* allowed for completing the writing task, conflicting *legal* considerations, conflicting *demands* from authority, and conflicting *information sources*. Most felt the pressure was more serious, more urgent, and more real than anything experienced in class. Almost half the students changed their ideas about the nature of journalism as a profession. They had not realised how stressful the work could be as these comments illustrate:

It made the pressures of being a journalist realist and I guess somewhat daunting because of all the things you have to be aware of. To be able to respond to the pressures, you have to be alert and efficient, something I need a lot more experience at I think.

Journalism is a high pressured environment and it is work, work, work!! The lookout for legal and ethical problems are more real and very important.

The idea of writing under pressure gives a sense of what journalists have to do. Have to think about legal/ethical issues on the spot.

Writing from a media release (rather than from an interview) was seen to be a useful experience because it provides second hand information only, and facts have to be checked within a narrow timeframe.

3.4 Learning from HOTcopy

All but three respondents agreed that HOTcopy simulates the workplace in a way that satisfies their learning needs. The majority rated highly or moderately the value of integrating unit content in HOTcopy rather than presenting it in readings, lectures or tutorials. **Features included in the scenario such as the newsroom tour, decision events, reflection questions, were consistently regarded as very useful by half the students and somewhat useful by the others.**

Students would prefer to use HOTcopy for practising workplace situations a number of times rather than as a once only, fresh experience for each scenario. Almost half would like to use the HOTcopy scenarios for completing real-world tasks as part of their assessment for the course. This suggests that students would engage more seriously and derive more value from the experience if it was assessable. Just under half would also like excerpts to be used in classes to raise issues about professional practice. More integration between HOTcopy and face-to-face classes would enhance the value of the resource and ensure that its unique contribution to learning is highlighted.

When asked what they had learnt from HOTcopy about the ‘doing of journalism’ that they had not learned elsewhere, most nominated the pressure of time constraints when trying to meet a deadline. Being interrupted by people and telephone calls was also mentioned. Comments relating to what was learnt included:

*The pressure of getting stories done on time; nothing said could explain that.
(I learnt) to quickly pick up on the best angle and to watch out for legal issues.
(I learnt) that ordinary people can give you tips for stories. (e.g. I ignored the call from my mother because I thought it was irrelevant.*

3.5 Navigational and technical issues

There appeared to be very few problems with navigation and technical aspects. During the observation session, all were on task almost immediately and worked through the scenario easily in a navigational sense. A few students were confused about the ‘Quit’ button and about saving their work to the desktop:

I thought if I saved my drugs story, I would be able to go back to the newsroom and do the features ideas, but after I saved it, I had two options, Pub scene or ‘Quit’. I thought quit meant it saved.

A couple would have preferred to save work to their own folder.

I had problems saving. I would rather choose a location on the computer myself than have it save to the desktop. It would also be more convenient to choose my own file name.

It needs to be clear that Quit means to quit to windows therefore students cannot get back to the pub scene or back to the newsroom.

Irrespective of the nature of the HOTcopy simulation, almost all students would like to know how to exit the simulated experience rather than have to force quit. As one argued,

(It’s) always better to have option to quit – computer games allow quit or pause.

4. Concluding Remarks

This pilot evaluation indicates that students' experiences were consistent with the design intention which was to simulate the real pressures of working in a print newsroom. Almost all students reported feeling pressured during their experience of HOTcopy, even though the first scenario is an elementary one. 'Felt pressure' is a primary goal of HOTcopy, expressed as such by the teaching staff and certain newspaper employers. HOTcopy appears to have delivered on that element of the problem-based, experiential learning approach employed in its workplace simulations. Most students felt the pressure was more serious, more urgent, and more real than anything experienced in class. Since 'First Few Pars' is the least complex scenario, similar responses may be forthcoming as students engage with other scenarios.

A most striking suggestion by some students was that they would like to use the HOTcopy scenarios for practice and for completing assessable work. They also valued HOTcopy's integration of unit content rather than presenting it only in readings, lectures and tutorials. This indicates that they regard it as a serious, worthwhile resource that could be more central to their journalism studies.

Overall, the evaluation provided useful data to inform revisions to survey questions and possibly tailor online versions for different cohorts and scenarios. A question worth investigating further, relates to the finding that almost half the students changed their ideas about the nature of journalism as a profession. In particular, it will be important to test the findings from this pilot evaluation by obtaining more broadly-based, detailed feedback from students majoring in Journalism during 2003.

Recommendations¹

Newsroom tour

- Provide more instruction/explanation on how to use the features in the newsroom such as the telephone, TV, radio.
- Enable students to turn the volume up on the TV to check for relevance/usefulness.
- Have the tour guide explain that not all features are used in all scenarios.
- Recommend strongly to students that they should take the tour, or make it compulsory.

Media release

- Make it clear that the media release is accessible at any time during the scenario.
- Provide an option for students to print the media release.

Features of the workshop students would like to have included/excluded

- Include someone providing encouragement – e.g. a more experienced journalist checking to see how the junior is going, whether they need help, or advice.
- Include a police scanner going in the background.
- Include a person sitting next to you constantly talking on the phone.
- Include toilet breaks and a debit of time for time taken.
- Include the editor's office in the background; have him/her pop out occasionally.
- Include instructions about how to use story windows.
- Include buttons that light up when something requires attention from the user.
- Exclude the coffee cup.

Enhancing the overall learning experience

- Use HOTcopy as a resource that is *central* to the unit, not an added experience.
- Integrate it more closely with face-to-face classes to raise issues about professional practice.
- Ensure that aspects of the HOTcopy experience are assessable e.g. have students use HOTcopy to complete a real world task that is relevant and appropriate for particular year levels.

Technical issues

- Clarify the use of the Quit button (i.e it means quit to Windows).
- Clarify the way students get to the pub scene or back to the newsroom.
- Provide an option for students to save their work to a location of their choice with a filename of their choice, (i.e. have a 'Save As' option).

¹ These recommendations have already been presented to the project team for consideration.

- In the CD instructions, stress the need for headphones when using HOTcopy in campus labs.

Postscript

1. The program chair reports that HOTcopy will be linked to assessment in a small way during second year, where marks for tutorial attendance will be allocated specifically for the use of HOTcopy in the computer laboratories. A mark allocation will also be made for the final work submitted in the unit *Editing and Design in a Multimedia Environment*. These initiatives will be possible once HOTcopy becomes a prescribed resource for 2003.
2. Most off-campus students are in the workforce, and while attending an on-campus study school, responded well to an invitation from the program chair to participate in an evaluation of HOTcopy. It was a disappointment for the team that the online questionnaire was not available, and another attempt will be made during a Saturday face-to-face meeting in Melbourne. The most striking unsolicited feedback from an off-campus student, was freely given by a male undertaking a journalism unit as part of his third year in a Faculty of Education teaching degree. He received HOTcopy in the mail and used it immediately, reporting considerable surprise and interest. He then revealed he was in a mid-career change from the television industry (Melbourne, Channel 7). This student made a special effort to contact us to convey his recognition of HOTcopy as a 'useful and authentic' resource.