

# Listening Circles Provide Model for Students in Disrupted Journalism Industry



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## 1 Introduction

It was almost five months after the murder of 11-year-old Luke Batty (Williams, 2014), after a cricket training session in a small Victorian town, that I became aware that at least three of my internship students had been sent to the site and taken part in a news conference that shook even seasoned journalists to their core. Luke had died at the hands of his father, who was then fatally shot by police (Hawley, Clifford, & Konkes, 2018; Ross, 2014). It had taken five months for me to become aware of their attendance at the news conference. Although I was in online contact with the students during their professional placements, covering such traumatic events is so normalised in Australian newsrooms that none of the students thought to raise it with me. It was mentioned, only in passing and in the most superficial way, in the students' final (assessment) reflective pieces at the end of semester. None of the students had been offered any support from their newsrooms, and frankly they did not expect it. It wasn't a one-off. In the past few years, journalism students on internships have found themselves at the scene of all kinds of traumatic events – from fires to road crashes and even mass murders – and many have been intimately involved in the production of deeply distressing news items, such as being asked to find the best angle for camera operators to film dead women and to help edit out the “gory bits”. Most would not have it any other way: Being at the centre of the news, however confronting, is the very career that many have signed up for. However, some – those who wanted to be sports or fashion reporters for example – had never considered that they would be covering such horrors. Almost all were concerned that none of the employers had thought to include the students in post-trauma counselling sessions, even the few employers that organised help for permanent staff.

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To support these students an intervention was needed, but it needed to be carefully conceived. Journalism is different to many other professions. Firstly, the work is embedded with trauma (Derienzo, 2016; Ricketson, 2017). Studies have found that the prevalence of post-traumatic stress disorder is higher among journalists than the general population, with 33% of reporters suffering vicarious trauma after interviewing victims or listening to survivors of violence (Aoki, Malcolm, Yamaguchi, Thornicroft, & Henderson, 2013, p. 380). Like a number of other first-responder professions, journalists are expected to confront the worst of humanity, but there is not a professional habit or regulation, like psychology or social work, that has embedded self-care into the work and there certainly is not a habit or a regulation to ensure support of the unpaid student intern. Secondly, journalists, in particular female journalists (Barton & Storm, 2016), are the target of abuse by those who do not understand their job, nor the value of it to democracy. Student journalists who are starting to promote and distribute their work in the online space are also targeted as part of these attacks. Thirdly, like many industries right now, journalism is going through a period of rapid change and disruption. Thousands of journalism jobs have been lost in the past decade in Australia alone. This disruption means news organisations are constantly being restructured, making it a massive administrative task to keep up to date with employers and the skills required for entry level journalists. It is also now common for news organisations to have multiple people in charge of supervising journalism interns in the space of a semester, for organisations to shut their doors, or for staff to disappear with little or no notice. When a news organisation unexpectedly closes, or announces redundancies, it's rare for someone to think to call the intern.

This chapter discusses the introduction of listening circles for students during and post their practicums to provide support for students and peers while on internships particularly around issues of trauma, abuse and disruption, but also to provide a model for future support that could be taken by students into their working lives.

## ***1.1 Disruption***

Changes to the way people access information through digital technologies has hastened the decline in journalism jobs in Australia, despite a strong economy and growth in population. As a result, journalism students often find that the places where they are interning are in the middle of disruption. Suddenly, staff are made redundant, closed down or merged and what was a happy placement one day, can suddenly become a distressing workplace. It's not a small problem. News organisations and news managers are under stress. The number of journalists employed by traditional print media businesses fell by 20% from 2014 to 2018. The new market entrants, the so-called 'digital natives' (Crikey, The Conversation, The New Daily, etc.), employ fairly small numbers of journalists and many start-ups in the digital space are financially vulnerable. Although there has been less disruption to

journalists working in radio and television, there have also been job cuts in both commercial and public broadcasters (Digital Platforms Inquiry Final Report, 2019).

The limited availability of highly competitive internships and timing of semesters has meant that journalism students often find they must attend several workplaces to complete the 15 day minimum internship requirement of their degrees, at different days and times over the space of 8 months. This means they are often required to do their placements over the university holidays, including the long summer holidays. Students can be required to do shift work, including starting as early as 3 am or finishing at midnight. They are often required to work weekends and public holidays. During non-standard work hours, students may find there is little or often very junior supervision available. While the majority of the placements require students to attend a newsroom setting, some are done virtually, using online communication and, generally, but not always, at least one face-to-face meeting.

Appropriate supervision and support for students while on journalism internships varies greatly for a range of reasons including the demographics of the profession, digital disruption, and the place of interns at the bottom rung of news organisation. Journalism is an occupation of the young, with 45.5% of Australian journalists in the 25–34 year-old age group (Josephi & Oller Alonso, 2018) which means reporters are young, and they have fewer experienced supervisors.

Adding to the pressure, is the trauma experienced by journalists on the job, and the personal abuse they receive when they are seeking information or promoting work through posts on digital media. Journalists report that they are often abused online and are subject to attacks that reference rape, death and hurting their children. A study of women in Australian media in 2015, for example, found that two out of every 5 journalists had experienced some kind of harassment, with three in five saying it was worse for women (Mates Over Merit, 2016). The Australian Human Rights Commission has also reported that rates of sexual harassment was highest in the media (81% of employees in information, media and telecommunications in the last five years) and women (66%) were more likely to be harassed than men (33%). (Everyone's business: Fourth national survey on sexual harassment in Australian workplaces 2018, pp. 9, 58).

## ***1.2 The Intervention***

It is against this background that the listening circles students were introduced, to support student journalists while on internships and to model life-long work habits of listening, reflection and support among peers. The listening circles were adapted from a similar, small, peer-led learning circles used by medical students to share experiences and learnings from placements in a confidential and supportive setting. Placements for trainee journalists and doctors are similar, in that students in both cohorts often work in isolation from student peers, often deal with traumatic

situations and, because of the diversity of the workplaces on offer, often have vastly different learning experiences.

There was also an underlying desire by the author to normalise the listening circles among journalism students so that, in a deeply disrupted industry, they had access to a model to seek support from peers, even outside their immediate workplace. They were described as supportive groups of peers where there would be continuous support. How the circles were perceived by the student body was deemed essential for their success, and as a result the name was changed from learning circles to listening circles to emphasise that the circles were safe spaces for students to listen and support each other, rather than a formal learning activity or assessable piece of work. In this they also differed from debriefing sessions where it could be seen as having an element of “reporting back” to employers or to university bosses.

The journalism students were deliberately told that listening circles were an adaptation of a model used by for medical students in a bid to develop life-long habits of professional engagement that would prepare them to start and continue such activities across their professional working lives (Harrison, Molloy, Bearman, Newton, & Leech, 2017). They were also told that other professions – such as social work, nursing, mental health, allied health and psychology – routinely use peer support and supervision techniques. It was hoped that by telling the journalism students that learning circles were already accepted as a useful tool by medical professionals, that they would see them as an “informal, co-operative way of learning that is based on natural patterns of human interaction” (MacGregor, 1993).

There were a number of set goals for the listening circles in the intervention which are described and discussed here. The first was to provide support for students outside normal classroom activities specifically around issues of trauma, abuse and work disruption. One of the significant issues for internships with journalism students is that – because they are organised often before or after the teaching semester begins – there is often not a formal opportunity to include classes or group reflective practice. It was hoped that, by using the listening circles, students would be able to meet more informally, listen, reflect and learn about each one of their different experiences in a safe and supportive environment, as they completed each of their internships outside of the assessment periods. The second goal of the listening circles was to share information between students. It was hoped that students who followed each other into an internship with the same news organisation would be able to share information and skills ahead of their placements and to provide support for each other. It was also hoped that students doing vastly different internships would be able to share their experiences and perhaps find some synergies. For example, students who were predominantly working with social media might be able to share skills with students who have been working with video editing, and vice versa. The third goal of the listening circles has been to provide greater support from peers and from teaching and work-integrated-learning staff about serious matters, including providing a triage system for other services if required. It was hoped that issues arising while on internships could be workshopped in a non-judgmental, caring manner, so that interns might have strategies to take back into the workplace.

Six listening circles were initially piloted in 2017 and 2018. Each was an hour-long voluntary activity in which a total of 30 journalism students undertaking internships for course credits signed up to take time to share their experiences and/or a particular learning point from their internships. Because the numbers attending for each of the listening circles were small, only a single group was formed on each occasion, which differed from the Monash model which had multiple simultaneous circles. It had been hoped that a number of circles could be formed at each meeting, but attendance did not justify this outcome.

Students were given a sheet of Do and Don't discussion-starters (adapted from Harrison et al., 2017). Originally, the plan was for the groups to lead their own discussions in the same manner as the Monash students. However, the small size of the gatherings saw the RMIT discussions facilitated by the lecturer who became the facilitator, with input at relevant times from the work-integrated-learning officer. This decision was influenced by resource availability rather than the maturity of the students, or the potential for some educational benefit from student-led discussion. The discussion prompts were:

**Do:** Ensure everyone has an opportunity to contribute; share something with the group: a story; something you were taught; a mistake; what kind of work did journalists do at your placement (features, broadcast); something that surprised, pleased or disappointed you; summarise a common problem at your work placement; describe something that you did the first time; a challenging situation; what kind of journalist do you want to become; and, was there an ethical issue that arose.

**Don't:** Share misinformation or Pool misery – try to be constructive as a group.

Under the guidance of the facilitator and a work-integrated-learning officer, each journalism student was given an opportunity to speak on whatever issue they wanted to raise, and other students were encouraged to respond or to further engage with the issue. This again differed from the medical model which encouraged student-led discussion, arguing that the students in that model felt better able to discuss their errors, away from the ears of instructors (Billett, 2019, p. 39). However, the small size of the journalism groups allowed each student to have adequate time to raise issues of concern and to respond to issues as they wished and put the facilitator in a role to add to the knowledge being shared. The students were told the discussion (although being recorded for research purposes) was being done under a “cone of silence” or “Chatham House Rules”. These familiar restrictions are well-used by journalists, and student journalists, who must become used to being told information that they cannot directly share or attribute.

### ***1.3 Conceptual Premises***

The listening circles were unashamedly adapted from learning circles, which have long been used for professional development, particularly in education. They have been defined as “small communities of learners among teachers and others who

come together intentionally for the purpose for supporting each other in the process of learning” (Collay, Dunlap, Enloe, & Gagnon, 1998, p. ix). Learning circles are used in a variety of settings and often bring together diverse groups of people who have a unique take on a situation or issue, as is the case with journalism students working in a wide variety of roles during their internships. The learning circle model can “serve as an opportunity to develop new relationships, share ideas and experiences, and brainstorm new solutions” (Dyck & Sommers, 2012, p. 2). The defining characteristic of a learning circle is a joint interest in the subject being discussed. There is no one way to correctly run a learning circle. However, it is generally understood that a facilitator will guide the group through any discussions. Collay et al. describe six essential conditions for creating optimum conditions for learning circles: “... building community; constructing knowledge; supporting learners; documenting reflection; assessing expectations; and changing cultures ...” (p. 8). Collay also provides a list of practical considerations: “... initiating, maintaining, sustaining and transforming the learning circles over time ...” (p. 118). The learning circles were renamed listening circles for this intervention to emphasise the listening element of the activity and to avoid suggesting that just one person in the room had the wisdom or that the activity was some kind of mandated class. It was hoped the name would help ensure that they listened to each other and adapted the information heard to their own individual needs. Unlike debriefing sessions, which often occur in groups at the end of internship experiences, the listening circles were designed to occur through the semester allowing students to listen to each other, to pool knowledge and to improve their experiences by allowing them to modify their workplace behaviour, if necessary, based on the knowledge and wisdom of the student group.

#### ***1.4 Method and Sample***

A total of 30 students took part in the pilot learning circles in six separate sessions across 2 years. Students came from the Bachelor of Communication (Journalism) or the Graduate Diploma of Journalism programs. All were enrolled in their final year of study in a mandatory internship course. Students are required to undertake a minimum of 15 days of internship (with one or potentially several employers) to successfully pass their course requirements. Often these internships occur in non-teaching times, particularly the long summer break, and therefore outside of normal class times.

Some students attended more than one circle. With university ethics approval, each student was also asked to complete a written survey at the end of each session. With the students’ consent, recorded discussion sessions were transcribed and thematically grouped into areas of interest. In the following discussion students are identified only by gender (Male or Female) plus a number (1, 2, 3 etc) to indicate who was talking. The names of all internship providers and were removed.

## 2 Discussion

### 2.1 Role of Facilitator

The role of the facilitator and workplace administrator was important to the listening circles, to ensure an appropriately supportive tone was maintained in the discussions and that when conversations veered off to other areas (such as complaints about university processes) the interns were brought back to the speaking points. The facilitator used a number of phrases such as “maybe there is some wisdom in the room, from the others” to direct the conversation away from the loudest voice. The work integrated placement officer – who had professional experience across other industries – was also able to provide interesting perspectives on issues. In all the recorded listening circle conversations, the students maintained a respectful attitude towards each other, asking genuine questions and offering potential suggestions to issues, in a gentle manner.

At times, the conversation allowed the facilitator to use humour to raise concerns about workplace behaviour. One student (F1) gave a detailed explanation of how the cameramen, “really macho young men” spent time “fiddling with my hair and putting it up and down”. This allowed a joking response from the facilitator: “Now, you do realise that (was) probably (because they were) trying to sleep with you?” To which (F1) responded: “You know what, if it helps.” Although lighthearted in tone, the exchange did raise an important point for both the facilitator, in her duty of care, as well as the student intern to consider that reaction in light of the #metoo movement (*Everyone’s business: Fourth national survey on sexual harassment in Australian workplaces* 2018).

The listening circles highlighted the students’ reluctance to seek advice from their cohort, even within a closed online group, unless it was from their closest friends. (F14) noted: “It is a little bit harder if you aren’t in friendship groups.” This was despite online communication being established within their year level in advance via a closed social media group. More-confident students said they went to the online group when they were struggling at work, with (F12) saying: “I found myself looking back and try(ing) to figure out who had been there before me to ask for advice.” However, another (F14) noted that she didn’t like the online arena because “it could be a little bit difficult to just be totally honest in that space”.

Many of those who attended the listening circles identified themselves as less-confident students, although all were competent. Journalism students generally mirror the general university student population, in that there are always high-achieving and super-anxious students. Internationally, there has been a recorded increase in the general study population of recorded issues with anxiety, panic attacks, fatigue and inability to cope with deadlines (Andrews & Wilding, 2004; Scott-Young, Turner, & Holdsworth, 2018). Any cursory examination of a self-efficacy survey would see a number of journalism students agreeing with the statement that they: feel overwhelmed by their studies; rely on others to support their placement development; that the placement situation is daunting; and that the placement demands



are seen to be more stressful than the academic demands. In one listening circle there was a particularly supportive conversation about jealousy within the cohort. One urged her peers:

Don't pay attention to everyone else's achievements. You don't get to see their struggles. So, I think just focus on your own story. (F8)

Almost every listening circle had a discussion at some point of a traumatic event that was attended by students, be it a shooting, a car accident, suicide, a drive-by killing, etc. Several students called out the need for "resilience" and "courage" as key skills required for all interns. Only one talked about having management intervention to ensure he was not exposed to trauma. The student, (M3), was upset that more than 40 min into a commute to reach the scene of a child's death, he got a call saying head office did not want him to do the job. He was told 'They don't want to send you out there. They're worried about you know, safety, and all this stuff'.

There was vocal and repeated support for the listening circles at each meeting, with several students returning for more sessions because, as (F4) noted: "These listening circles are good, because we come in and we talk to each other. And I think that's what we really need." And (F15) noted: "I have the issue right now and I don't know where to find someone to help."

The role of the facilitator was seen as valuable for being able to bring their industry experience to solving issues, to provide guidance on how to handle some more troubling work behaviours, and importantly to ensure the students remained on track with the discussions. Being able to point students to appropriate support services when necessary was therefore important.

## 2.2 *Placement Choice*

The news outlets where students were placed as interns had a huge impact on how they were treated and, often, how they responded to the placement. Although one might have expected the high-profile mainstream news organisations to have had the best practices to support interns, the reality was, these bigger employers often had an endless stream of interns and many on-the-ground reporting staff did little more than tolerate their presence, which to be fair, is understandable with shrinking newsrooms. Many of the larger news organisations no longer have cadet staff training, and many new employees do not have much oversight at all. But, in smaller news organisations, with a younger staff, student interns generally reported a better learning experience. One student was delighted:

The people (at a regional news outlet) were really lovely as they were just so friendly. I really loved it. I was going out on three or four stories every day ... (and) ... any problems I had in terms of like, using programs and anything, I just asked straight away anyone around me, and they were always really happy to help. (F12)



Another enthused:

“It was really fun. Just in terms of the workplace culture, it’s just amazing at (a news organisation) how they treat interns. It’s just incredible. Because, you know, they must realise that, we’re not getting paid for any of this. So there, they sort of tend to acknowledge the help that they receive, and the you know, all the contributions you make, no matter how small it is, which is great.” (M1)

Meanwhile, another declared:

“All the journalists I worked with were really welcoming. (They’re) the sort of people (who) don’t forget that they were once in the same situation.” (M2)

Ensuing the students realized that each news environment had a distinctive work culture and that the newsroom staff may, or may not, be welcoming for a range of reasons unrelated to the students was a key understanding from the listening circles. Many placement options look good from the outside, but the reality was that many of the smaller newsrooms, or lesser known news organisations, provided a more supportive internship environment. Giving students the chance to talk about internships while during internships allowed some of them to rethink their future internship options.

### ***2.3 Overlooked in Newsrooms***

A very clear discussion theme emerged in most listening circles about the difference between how news editors told students to behave on internships and the expectations of day-to-day newsroom supervisors. After a lecture from one news editor, the students were animated in their listening circle discussion about how the lower-level staff completely disagreed. One news editor told all students that they were expected to pitch ideas in editorial meetings, but one noted the normal newsroom staff did not want that:

I found everything he said was very contradictory to what actually goes on. One of the older journo told me ‘God help you if you interrupt their meeting. I wouldn’t say anything if I were you.’ And I can’t imagine them listening either. Because it’s a very, like, intense sort of circle. (F12)

Other students agreed that they had been told to come with ideas but it was clear in many places their ideas were not welcomed:

I was mostly having a panic attack about pitching stories. But, in the end, like I just had to, and it’s sort of like, once you get off that diving block it’s okay. (F6)

One intern spoke about finally getting a story accepted, although most of the newsroom got her name wrong – every single day:

It was actually just in the last couple days, and they turned to me and said: ‘The intern has a story’. Everyone was like, coming up to me like (incorrect name), that’s a good story. (F10)

There was a clear theme in the listening circles that in many places there were different expectations of newsroom bosses and those whom they worked alongside. The students understood that while they were being encouraged to speak up and to

make themselves stand out during the placements by editors, they were clearly discouraged from doing so by others around them. This contradiction left many perplexed.

## 2.4 *Value of Internships*

As reported by the students, there were many helpful and wonderful people in newsrooms, and students had magnificent opportunities in many news organisations. The listening circles were filled with the excitement of young people looking to enter a thrilling career, and stories abounded of genuinely lovely people who had helped students get a story in the paper, on-air, or simply let them record something over and over again. But, as modern newsrooms have a large turnover of staff and redundancy rounds, it was not always possible to know, from semester to semester, what kind of experience the students might have. As (F8) noted: “It’s a lot to do with just like the luck of the draw, who’s there.”

In the listening circles, students were able to talk about how those experiences had clarified their career choice:

You can obviously tell people what a typical journalist would do in a day ... but it’s impossible to get a real sense of it until you you’re in a newsroom. (M1)

I’ve actually absolutely loved the experience of being in newsrooms ... it’s kind of reaffirmed the fact that I want to be a reporter. (F12)

Even when the internship experience was not great, some students could see the benefit of attending. As one said:

As much as there were a few slow days or slow moments, I did kind of sit there and go yeah, ‘This is it. This is why you are doing what you’re doing’. (M4)

The placements provided an insight into the reality of the profession, which included stressful situations, long hours, weekends, public holidays and 24-h shifts. With all journalists using smartphones, there was an expectation that interns, too, were “always-on”. For some, this was exciting, as one noted:

It’s one of those jobs where you never look at the clock, going it’s 10 minutes to clock-off time. You always have to be on your toes and ready to go. (M4)

But for others that level of commitment was daunting. Some quickly realised that their lifelong dream to work for a particular news organisation would not be a good fit. As one young man discovered:

I didn’t really like it that much. I think it was just me. I didn’t really feel like I fit in there that well, which I think reflected in my overall (experience). (M3)

The listening circles significantly gave space to those who had decided against the profession, with (F1) declaring: “I don’t think I want to become a journalist.” The value of the internship for crystalising career choices was stark. This allowed the facilitator to explore problems further, and to discuss other, related career or future study options, where appropriate.

## 2.5 *Hard and Soft Skills*

The listening circles provided the opportunity for interns to share advice on practical matters, such as swapping passwords for casual logins, doing deep research before turning up to an internship, handling conversations with “silent” colleagues on long car rides, and even on how to groom hair for television presentation. However, most discussion was about dealing with difficult people-to-people interactions in stressful environments.

Personality seemed to have a lot to do with how students survived in their placements. For instance, (F12) was clear in what she wanted: “I just want them to get me to like me.” Students interning in more competitive newsrooms (F9, M3,M4, F8) spoke of the need to be:

really persistent with stories, even if the staff seem really pissed off with you annoying them or whatever, just keep going and keep persisting until they eventually say yes (student name). (F9)

Developing relationships with individual reporters was considered more valuable than more senior people, even though the more senior staff were the ones who would ultimately make decisions on hiring. As (M4) noted: “The chiefs-of-staff might not be great, but the journos are. They’ve sat in the (intern) chair before.” Still, in some places, even the reporters weren’t all that helpful. Having been in a broadcasting internship, (F12) noted: “there was about six producers, and not a single one of them was interested in what you were doing” and “none of the producers in news came to help me”.

Although it had been anticipated that there would be a lot of discussion of hard work skills, the listening circles proved useful far beyond the sharing of concrete knowledge (such as passwords). They were particularly useful for sharing intelligence about how to deal with tricky people, and who the best people to work within a newsroom might be. These soft skills are often under estimated by students until they hit the workforce.

## 2.6 *Digital Disruption*

As outlined earlier, journalism, like many other industries, is going through massive disruption and technology transitioning. This has not only resulted in the reduction of traditional newsroom jobs, but the rise of more precarious forms of employment, a feature of the gig economy. This has had a flow-on affect on interns, who found that no longer are internships solely in a physical space. Some are now in a virtual space (i.e., online) with minimal contact. One student, (F15), noted that she had not yet been to the office of the organisation for whom she was working, although she was close to producing her first piece of publishable work. The student noted it was “challenging” and sought the advice of the listening circle about the self-discipline required to work while not in an office. She noted that she expected her future work to be conducted remotely.

Another student raised concern in her listening circle about the stressed nature of the employees in a small online publication. Describing what she saw, (F17) made several comments about her line supervisor being “very stressed” and “constantly saying; ‘I’m sorry. This is just right now very stressful time.’” A lack of time to provide appropriate supervision for interns was noted in most listening circles. Another student agreed:

I came into the office and said: ‘I have a few ideas’, and they were like: ‘Not now, not now’. They don’t really have time to discuss or (even to) look at other stuff. (F15)

Even large newsrooms have been going through massive redundancy rounds, again with flow-on impacts on interns. Full-time staff were often blinded by their own stress to be concerned with any impact on interns. One student, (F10), reported that in one of the nation’s largest newsrooms she wasn’t shown how to use any of the computer systems, even though there were logons for interns to use. The student used her personal mobile and personal email while working on a story that was eventually not only used in Victoria, but led news bulletins in every state of Australia:

I actually ended up hacking into the (intern) computer one day by just trying to put passwords in. I knew the username (for interns) but no one would show me. I actually would go up to people and ask: ‘Can I just have five seconds. Can you just show me?’ And they’d say: ‘No, sorry, I can’t help you’. (F10)

Although workplaces were vetted well in advance of internships occurring, it was clear from the listening circles that newsrooms were often very stressful places for current staff, who often had little capacity to provide guidance for others. It was clear that this was an issue in the larger, better funded newsrooms, as well with smaller outlets, and this had a serious impact on the experience of the interns and their experience of the industry.

## ***2.7 The Most Vulnerable***

Interns are the most vulnerable people in most news organisations. Not only are they not being paid, they have often given up paid employment to complete their internships. Most felt they were constantly being assessed for a potential job and, therefore, felt that they could not say “no”, even to the most unreasonable requests. Within the listening circles, students shared stories of being asked to illegally extend their internships, sometimes by hours, days or even weeks, on the promise of a potential job. They were all aware of the Fair Work Commission rules around internships:

Legally, it’s supposed to be a three-week internship, (but if I complain or ask to be paid) there goes all opportunities of me ever been employed. So, it’s kind of like in those situations, you have to kind of shut up and suck it up. (F6)

Others found they were putting in 13- or 14-h days straight without a break. As (F2) pointed out, they were already doing long days: “We’d get there early and we leave well after the bulletin.” As one young man said:

There’s moments where you feel like you should say something, but the point is they are in the strong(er) position and you know it’s not going to play so well, so you’re not gonna say ‘no’. (M4)

Other students agreed with (M4) that: “You are an intern, but you are an adult as well. You have a voice.” But few knew how to respond to unreasonable requests. One intern was unexpectedly asked on a Friday night to work over the weekend but replied no. When she got home, her own father told her to go. The student explained:

(The news boss) said in a way, like, ‘oh, like you don’t have to’, but it’s kind of like ‘if you say no, we will judge you’. (F8)

The feeling that the internship was an audition for a job was real. Students told the listening circles of spending considerable amounts of money on new work clothes and grooming, in the hope of gaining a job. As the female students in particular noted, it was worth the effort and expense:

It’s like almost a uniform. It’s a lot of clothes you’d never wear outside of work, either, like certain colours and stuff. I did spend a lot of money on clothes. Like, this is a job interview every day of my life. (F2)

There is definitely the expectation that you (will) have full makeup on. And, you know, you have to look the part. Even if you are the intern. (F1)

Male students also needed to consider their grooming, with (M1) taking seriously the direction to shave off his beard: “You’ve got to do what you gotta do to get into this industry. So, you know, you’ve gotta sacrifice to get into these sort of things.”

The listening circles provided an opportunity for students to workshop answers to employers who had unreasonable expectations about working hours, and for the facilitator to remind them that calling the university for assistance was also an option. The link between internships and future job offers was clearly made.

## 2.8 *Rudeness to Interns*

Although the listening circles were established with a firm guidance around learning journalistic skills, discussions focused for more than 70% of the time around dealing with soft skills, in particular dealing with difficult people at their workplace. Many students had negative experiences, which (F10) described as “degrading and humiliating every day” and (F1) noted: “Oh, they are quite rude.” One (F2) was introduced to someone on staff who responded: “Why the fuck are you interning here?”.

The rudeness was far beyond busy people not remembering their names, or not remembering the time. The students all recognised that in a busy news environment, that it could be difficult to find time to be helpful, but as (F1) noted: “There’s only

so many times you can ask people? Can I help you? Can I learn something from you?” One student, (F10), was prepared for a poor experience, after speaking to another intern. She said she went in with low expectations and wasn’t at all surprised to find in a major national newsroom that on her first day, “no one met me and I actually ended up getting yelled at by security”.

The listening circles allowed for students to discuss resilience and to more generally discuss the workplace culture of news outlets. For many the behaviour of newsrooms was a sharp contrast to the supportive and caring environment of schools and university classrooms, although even post-graduate students who had worked in other environments found some of the blunt newsroom behaviour challenging.

## ***2.9 Ethical Standards***

Listening circle discussions proved particularly useful for students who had been confronted with an ethical dilemma in the workplace, especially if what transpired was different to what they had been taught in the classroom, or what they had expected to experience. There was much amusement at the lengths some reporters would go to get an exclusive story, including physical pushing and shoving at news conferences. Many interns were used for legwork in such situations, which saw (F1) observe: “Yeah, like, chasing down poor footballers as they are trying to go to the bathroom.” Some found that they quickly adapted to avoiding work that they found distasteful, with (F1) telling her bosses: “Sorry. My battery died. I didn’t get it.”

The listening circles allowed students the chance to discuss with their peers what was and wasn’t ethical behaviour in the real world. The discussions were enlightening (and rather encouraging) for students and the facilitator. The students clearly found this useful and many were clearly pleased to see that their own ethical decisions had been vindicated, or their discomfort at a situation had been echoed by others.

## ***2.10 Support from Outside the Internship***

Several interns noted that returning to bad work environments day after day had an impact on their mental health. Showing some wisdom, they urged their peers to:

Spend time with people who support you and stuff like that outside of the internships because it can get really tough sometimes, especially if you’re in like a shady workplace. (F10)

Don’t sacrifice your mental health ... you don’t realise how much energy it actually takes out of you. And, even if you’re just at one internship, if you’re in a really bad place, don’t take on more than you can handle. Because it gets really tough. (F8)

Having support from friends or loved ones outside of the internships, or the workplace for that matter, is considered vitally important to the processing of traumatic events. However, many internships were in places away from students' homes or the internship had put them in a situation where they were unable to see friends or family to decompress. Post-listening circle surveys showed those who interned in their hometowns, or were able to regularly stay in contact with their friends, reported higher levels of satisfaction with their internships. For instance, (F5) talked about it being "easier" to "make suggestions about already existing stories" because she already knew the locations. Meanwhile, one was hoping for a far better reaction to an internship in his home town because:

it's probably going to be laid back and really, really relaxed ... because I'm more familiar with (the town) as well as (there is) probably stuff that I could pitch because I know about it. (M3)

Even for interns who were not in their hometowns, they often found that smaller regional news organisations with younger staff were much more supportive:

Because they are smaller newsroom, having an extra person in there really changes things for them. So, they, I think they sort of took me under their wing a little bit. (F12)

The listening circles were a really good venue to emphasis to the students that needed to have support outside of journalism to succeed, not just in their internships but in the future working life. It was clear that the students did better mentally when they were supported well, and that was often in smaller news organisations or a regional centre, particularly if it was in their hometown.

## ***2.11 Not the Work Experience Kid***

In some places, the university interns, sometimes at the end of a three-year bachelor degree, or others even completing a postgraduate degree, felt that they were given little more to do than Year 10 work experience students would have. The listening circles heard stories of students producing online work for news outlets, only – in (F8)'s experience – for it be "pulled down" from the publication because "it was 'too big a story for an intern to write'". In larger metropolitan newsrooms, interns realised they would not be given work to do that was needed. As (M3) realised: "They kind of don't really trust you."

Interestingly, at just one listening Circle did the conversation turn to how much the news organisations were missing by not listening to interns. They felt they had a contribution that shouldn't be overlooked, as (M4) observed:

We don't have their experience, but we're kind of the future, so you believe in yourself, put yourself forward. (M4)

Several students who had interned at the same place, an award-winning long-running news outlet, noted that they needed modernising. Another said:



They need someone, not me, who knows how to work social media, to take that program and bring it up to speed. They're, like, too in their own heads about it. They're, like: "This has always been really old school journalism. They do it. They do what they do well but, like, it's not working. They have a really old audience. Young people just won't watch it, and young people are really engaged in news. (F8)

The listening circles provided a fascinating insight into some news operations from the perspective of young people. Many of the news organisations that were losing viewers and readers in droves did not ever consider that the intern might have some valuable insight.

## 2.12 *Safe Spaces*

Although the listening circles are built around the concept of being "safe" places where students could feel validated but appropriately challenged, there were times when issues arose that needed to be referred to campus experts. Listening circles were not designed to be, and should not, replace professional psychological or medical help. During one of the listening circles, a student (F17) raised issues she was having with her paid work and her ability to manage university deadlines. The student spoke of a "family crisis" and made it clear she did not want to discuss the need for counselling with students who were employed to work on the university help desk. The facilitator and students respected the "safe" space of the listening circle and, without probing into the nature of the issue, gave her strategies for getting on-campus help without going through to the student help desk.

Concerns about being able to balance paid work, university studies and unpaid internships were universal. Inflexible employers for the students' paid work were common:

It's not always the internships ... my work wouldn't cut my hours. They weren't flexible. Every other aspect of your life isn't going to be as flexible. (F3)

Another student, (F12), asked how others were managing, because she was no longer passing her academic work: "I got to a point where I had to drop my elective. And I'm not passing my contextual either." Yet another spoke of becoming really sick trying to balance work, internships and study. And (F4) said her work would not vary her hours so she was working until 6 am "and then I was going to (the news organisation), straight away at 7 am. Then trying to hand in assignments." However, in a different listening circle conversation, (M2) argued that students needed to manage their own affairs:

Considering everything that you told us, if people are still willing to do those kind of simultaneous internships, they're aware of the risks, they understand what they understand the impact is going to have on them. If they are still willing to do that, then either, there's nothing you can say to help them or that is something that they actively want to do. (M2)

The facilitator was able to use these conversations as a way of pointing students to help services available within, and external to, the university. This strongly spoke to the value of having a facilitator with knowledge of available support networks involved in the listening circles.

### 3 Considerations for Curriculum and Pedagogy

Prior to the introduction of the listening circles, students were supported on their internships via online discussion forums and occasional classes. The only way problems were raised were in the reflective logbook of their daily activities. Students were specifically asked at the end of the internship – well after any intervention could occur - to respond questions about their placement, including queries about being given appropriate supervision and guidance; meeting their supervisor regularly; and whether they had someone to talk to about any problems or concerns.

The listening circles were overwhelmingly considered valuable by students and staff. Students responded that the listening circles were interesting, worthwhile and, where it was appropriate, they reported that they could incorporate some of the learnings/strategies from the discussions into their future internship work. Students overwhelmingly wanted the process moderated by an academic or facilitator. In the open-ended question at the end of session survey, one noted that it was “Informative. Interesting to compare experiences” and “a great experience” and several said they would have liked to have attended more sessions.

There were distinct differences between each of the listening circles. Students who attended the listening circles in 2017 often used the discussion to raise grievances with particular placements and processes, more than to share tips and skills about workplace skills for other interns. However, students in 2018 found that the listening circles, which were built into their learning schedule time, provided ongoing support for internships they were still undertaking. It is not clear if this was because of the make-up of the groups and their experiences, or more adroit focusing of the conversation by the facilitator.

Survey group data revealed that students’ most preferred topics were discussing ways of handling challenging people and stressed supervisors. Students said that the listening circle activity impacted positively on aspects of their learning behaviour. However, as Harrison et al. (2017) found, it only took one student to dampen the enthusiasm for the rest, and one of the 2017 listening circle sessions was best described as “pooling misery”. The lesson for facilitators is to attempt to steer the conversation back to the discussion points.

### 4 Potential Improvements

Listening circles were found to be a useful pedagogical tool for improving learning and better supporting journalism students during, and post, internships. However, it was interesting that the initial impetus for initiating listening circles (experiences of trauma) was discussed little at any of the sessions, particularly compared with other discussion of workplace culture and behaviour. While trauma was, and remains, a big part of journalism, and students did witness events while on internships, it did not come up as a major issue for them. There was not, however, a specific traumatic incident – such as the Luke Batty murder – in close proximity in time to the

scheduled listening circles. If a major issue had occurred it would have allowed not only for a debriefing of the event, and given the facilitator an opportunity to remind students of available help.

The digital disruption on newsrooms, and the resulting stress on staff, by far took up the most discussion time. Sharing strategies for dealing with stressed and rude people was particularly useful for students. The students certainly appreciated knowing that they were not the only ones on the end of some pretty poor behaviour in particularly stressed newsrooms, but particularly difficult individuals. Online harassment and harassment more generally was also not specifically raised, although one anecdote from a student allowed a discussion of #metoo, and the types of behaviour that were or were not acceptable in a workplace, as well as ways of handling them. It was also clear that along with the actual internship experiences, the listening circles had a role in clarifying students' career goals. The vast majority determined that they wanted to continue in their chosen path as a journalist, despite any difficulties, but at least one was clear that journalism would not be her future direction, and this allowed an individual discussion with that student outside the formal circle meetings.

There were key issues which need to be addressed within the listening circles to ensure that they worked successfully in other settings. Firstly, a key to the success of the listening circles was their incorporation into the teaching schedule, i.e. at the same time and room as the lectures. Students require both time and space to attend, and setting the circles at a time they had free in their learning schedule was important. By setting the meetings at the same time and place to formal classes (on alternative weeks), students could plan to maximise their attendance. Using incentives such as free food and t-shirts were useful in encouraging attendance for some cohorts. However, interest in the listening circles grew in 2018 as students talked among themselves about the value of debriefing after their experiences. A number of students who were not able to attend the session because of their scheduled internships formally asked for more sessions to be held.

Secondly, academic staff and/or the facilitators needed to ensure that the purpose of the sessions, the role and processes were clear, to ensure students felt they could safely share mistakes and experiences with peers. Confidentiality was important. A "cone of silence" is possible when there is a clear person in authority, emphasising this requirement in the room, but this is not necessarily enough. A sense of camaraderie within the cohort is also a useful way of ensuring students maintain confidentiality of the process. A sense of safety can also come from students understanding that discussions are not assessed, so there is no danger in losing marks from sharing a mistake with their peers, lecturers or other staff.

There is a third issue for competitive industries such as journalism, in that some students may fear that sharing information could give their peers an added advantage if they undertook an internship at the same organisation at a later date. However, there was no evidence during the listening circles that students were holding back in their discussions for fear of advantaging others. There was some concern that more-confident students might overshadow less-confident ones. However, this was not witnessed in the listening circles. In fact, it appeared to be far more beneficial for

less-confident students to hear that others had similar issues, or to get advice about how to appear more confident in the workplace. Building listening circles into the assessment process in future years would ensure a larger attendance. However, as outlined above, there are many good reasons not to have it as a non-assessable activity, to create that feeling of a safe space, and to allow the free flow of ideas and admissions.

With the current disruption to the journalism industry, plus increasing numbers of young people working in smaller newsrooms or as freelancers, there could be value in instigating a process of listening circles into their regular work routines. Just as doctors regularly meet to discuss cases, and nurses, mental health workers, social workers and psychologists are required to talk about their work with supervisors, there could be great value in journalists adopting the same practice. It is hoped that the lessons of the listening circles provide a framework for students to carry into their working careers, and perhaps create a new attitude to learning in the future. Listening circles certainly made a considerable impact as a post-practicum learning enhancement strategy for internship students, and are now a valued but still non-assessed part of the placement programs.

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