Simulated solutions: Using a clinical simulation exercise to prepare journalism students for trauma-intensive interviews

Solutions simulées : Utilisation d’un exercice de simulation clinique pour préparer les étudiants en journalisme à des entretiens à fort impact traumatique

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ABSTRACT

When disaster strikes, journalists are often among the first on scene. They are also there in the aftermath, speaking to survivors as they come to terms with what has happened to them. How journalists interact with and interview trauma survivors without causing further harm has increasingly become a focus of newsrooms and, by extension, the journalism programs whose mission it is to train students to enter the industry. Yet despite research on the impacts journalists can suffer as a result of covering traumatic events, training on trauma-informed approaches to interviews is limited. Drawing on the use of clinical simulations in higher education classroom environments, this article outlines how an interview simulation exercise was conceived and conducted as part of a specialized course on trauma-informed reporting at a university in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada. Included are insights from students who participated in the simulation exercise and considerations of where simulation exercises might elsewhere be used in a journalism-training context. The widespread adoption of video conferencing tools as part of the shift to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, which imposed changes to long-established pedagogies, facilitated the use of such tools to conduct the outlined interview simulation exercise in an accessible, innovative, and practical manner.

RéSUMÉ

Lorsqu’une catastrophe survient, les journalistes sont souvent parmi les premiers à arriver sur les lieux. Ils sont également présents après la catastrophe, s’entretenant avec les survivants qui doivent faire face à ce qui leur est arrivé. La manière dont les journalistes interagissent avec les survivants d’un traumatisme et les interrogent sans les blesser davantage est de plus en plus au centre des préoccupations des salles de rédaction et, par extension, des programmes de journalisme dont la mission est de former les étudiants à l’industrie du journalisme. Pourtant, malgré les recherches sur les impacts que peuvent subir les journalistes lorsqu’ils couvrent des événements traumatisants, la formation sur les approches des entretiens fondées sur les traumatismes est limitée. Inspirant de l’utilisation de simulations cliniques dans les salles de classe de l’enseignement supérieur, cet article décrit comment un exercice de simulation d’entretien a été conçu et réalisé dans le cadre d’un cours spécialisé sur les reportages tenant compte des traumatismes dans une université d’Ottawa (Ontario), au Canada. L’article comprend des commentaires d’étudiants qui ont participé à l’exercice de simulation et des considérations sur les autres utilisations possibles des exercices de simulation dans le contexte de la formation au journalisme. L’adoption généralisée d’outils de vidéoconférence dans le cadre du passage à l’apprentissage en ligne pendant la pandémie de COVID-19, qui a imposé des changements à des pédagogies établies de longue date, a facilité l’utilisation de ces outils pour mener l’exercice de simulation d’entretien décrit d’une manière accessible, innovante et pratique.

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can the home page of any news platform or venue and you’re likely to find stories involving trauma. Yet the vast majority of journalists working in Canada receive no formal trauma training in journalism school (Pearson & Seglins, 2022). Most don’t receive training in the newsroom either (Pearson & Seglins, 2022). Instead, they cobble together skills by talking to others or figuring out an approach on their own, often without knowing what is considered to be best practice.

There have been concerted efforts over the past two decades to increase trauma literacy in Canada and fill this gap in journalism pedagogy. The Canadian Journalism Forum on Violence and Trauma, for example, holds training workshops and conferences to build awareness and facilitate discussion among journalists, employers, unions, other journalistic organizations, and journalism educators across the country.¹ There is a question of where this training fits within the broader curricula of college and university programs. Does it belong in mandatory, entry-level reporting courses to prepare all students at the ground floor? Or does it belong in specialized reporting courses for upper-year students keen on investigating this emerging area of journalistic practice? I would argue it belongs in both places, among others, the development and delivery of an interview simulation exercise that saw students interview actors who portrayed survivors of a traumatic event.

This study explores three key questions: a) What were the impacts of using actors to create realistic scenarios in which journalism students could practice trauma-aware interview skills? b) How did the trauma simulations draw on the deep clinical simulations associated with teaching hospital methods? and c) What were the consequences of delivering the simulations using video conferencing technology?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The discourse on ethical reporting on victims of violence and trauma dates back to the 1990s (Simpson & Boggs, 1999), and coalesced with the creation of the Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma, based at Columbia Journalism School in New York City. Its research unit has subsequently conducted numerous peer-reviewed studies on newsrooms and traumatic stress (McMahon, 2001; Newman, Simpson & Handschuh, 2003; Newman, Shapiro & Nelson, 2009; Nelson 2011; Pyevich, C., Newman, E. & Daleiden, E., 2003). War journalists were among the first journalists to be formally studied; they were found to have significantly higher rates of post-traumatic stress disorder and major depression than their counterparts who do not report on war (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; Feinstein, Owen & Blair, 2002; Feinstein & Sinyor, 2009). However, while the vast majority of journalists will never do this type of work, many continue to be exposed to trauma on the job on a regular basis. “The most effective journalist,” according to Simpson and Coté (2006), “is one who understands the risks of his or her work, has been trained well for that work, and is confident of the support of employers or others during and after the coverage of violent events” (p. 267). Thus, it is crucial for researchers to explore the challenges faced by journalists working in local media, whose exposure to traumatic events may accumulate over time, as well as the training and education they have received either on the job or in the classroom.

GLOBAL RESEARCH

International research on journalism and trauma has resulted in a number of survey-based studies of journalists over the last two decades.² A 2013 Canadian study documented the experiences of Canadian photojournalists and journalists who were exposed to trauma victims or survivors in national and international trauma, conflict, or disaster events through interviews with 31 photojournalists and journalists who worked in both print and broadcast news (Keats & Buchanan, 2013). A subsequent Canadian study, published in 2022, documented the experiences of more than 1,200 journalists and media workers in Canada (Pearson & Seglins, 2022).

Repeated exposure to trauma and its victims can have dramatic negative effects on media work-
ers, and while there may be no way to prevent these effects, training can help minimize them. Rentschler (2010) found training can have a positive effect on the field of journalism, while unpreparedness allows journalists, especially those early in their careers, to be thrown into situations they are unable to emotionally handle.

TEACHING TRAUMA-INFORMED REPORTING SKILLS

Many have argued the best place for this training is in journalism schools, because emerging journalists are highly likely to encounter trauma very early in their careers (Barnes, 2013). As one study showed, 84 per cent of journalists had covered at least one traumatic story within the first five years of their careers (Johnson, 1999). When young reporters are or feel ill-prepared to cover stories that involve trauma, this lack of preparation heightens the possibility of doing harm to interview subjects (Duncan & Newton, 2010) and often results in insensitive or intrusive behaviours on the part of the reporter (Walsh-Childers, Lewis & Neely, 2011).

The Taking Care report (2022) found 90 per cent of survey respondents did not receive trauma training in journalism school. While only one institution, Carleton University, offers a complete course on trauma-informed reporting, a number of other schools said efforts to include trauma training in some capacity comprise “mentions, modules, workshops and other training formats” (Pearson & Seglins, 2022, p. 28). Some institutions offer intersectional perspectives on trauma, notably how it affects people of colour (Pearson & Seglins, 2022).

Similarly, when journalism scholars Gretchen Dworznik and Adrienne Garvey surveyed accredited journalism schools in the United States in 2016, they uncovered few examples of stand-alone courses on trauma reporting. Dworznik and Garvey (2019) used the list of fully accredited journalism schools available on the website of the Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (ACEJMC) to recruit one representative from each school to complete a survey. From an initial list of 100, the authors received responses from a total of 41 schools. Of these, only one indicated that their program had a course in its curriculum dedicated specifically to teaching about how trauma can impact journalists (Dworznik & Garvey, 2019). Thirty-five respondents said they taught about victim trauma as part of other courses, while five schools said they did not teach the topic at all (Dworznik & Garvey, 2019, p. 374). Class discussion was the most common teaching method cited, followed by lecture and required readings. Inviting working or retired journalists into classes as guest speakers and using videos was also cited by some schools as the preferred method for addressing the topic (Dworznik & Garvey, 2019, p. 374). Three schools incorporated role-play exercises and invited trauma victims to be guest speakers, while only one said it used role-play exercises with actors to teach trauma (Dworznik & Garvey, 2019, p. 375).

The Dworznik and Garvey study found that the accredited journalism schools they surveyed supported the idea that journalists can be harmed by the traumatic stories they cover and that journalists also have the potential to harm victims of trauma during the course of covering a story; respondents also agreed journalists in-training need both trauma and victim training before they enter the workforce (p. 378), in part because it shouldn’t be assumed students will receive such training once they enter a newsroom. Still, there appears to be a reticence to dramatically alter curriculum to address these gaps by devoting more time to preparing students for reporting on traumatic events, meaningfully interacting with survivors, and learning to assess, manage, and respond to their own emotional reaction to assignments. Dworznik and Garvey highlight this as noteworthy given that research shows journalists are not receiving this type of training on the job and that most newsrooms do not offer a supportive environment for those who are unsure of how to handle trauma within themselves or in the victims they interact with (p. 378).

The Canadian study that found 90 per cent of respondents – people who are or have been working journalists in the past five years – didn’t receive
trauma training in journalism school revealed that 85 per cent haven’t received training at work either (Pearson & Seglins, 2022, p. 28). Almost no reporters, writers, photographers, or camera operators received any trauma training, despite the higher likelihood of being on the frontlines of traumatic events (Pearson & Seglins, 2022, p. 28). “I feel extremely lucky that I haven’t experienced trauma through my work in media,” one Halifax, Nova Scotia-based writer said in the report. “It feels inevitable that it will happen at some point though, and that scares me because I’ve never had any training on trauma reporting in journalism school and I don’t want to come across as weak to my manager by asking how to deal with it or appearing hesitant to cover certain stories” (qtd. in Pearson & Seglins, 2022, p. 28).

SIMULATION TRAINING

Simulation-based learning activities are common in the field of medical education. Such simulations, often involving the use of trained actors, advance the competencies and skills of prospective doctors and nurses. Simulation-based learning also occurs in other fields, including teacher education, engineering, and management (Chernikova et al, 2020). Knowledge application in realistic situations has been shown to be important for the development of complex skills. Simulation-based learning “allows reality to be brought closer into schools and universities” and provides learners with an opportunity to “take over certain roles and act in a hands-on (and heads-on) way in a simulated professional context” (Chernikova et al, 2020, p. 504).

In particular, “clinical simulations,” defined as recorded, live-actor interactions that approximate challenging situations in professional settings, immerse students in a low-risk setting where interactions can be observed and trainees can receive coaching and feedback. Clinical simulations allow students to transform knowledge into action and ensure students have comparable opportunities to practice key skills (Dotger, n.d.). According to Ben Dotger, director of the Center for Experiential Pedagogy and Practice and Syracuse University’s School of Education and co-author of Clinical Simulations as Signature Pedagogy, clinical simulations allow students to “bring together what they’ve been taught and put it into action in an environment that challenges them but also allows for mistakes” (Walls, 2022).

The use of standardized patients and simulation exercises in medical schools grows out of an understanding that the goal of medical education is to prepare physicians to “deliver safe, competent, quality patient care” (Cantrell & Deloney, 2007, p. 377). In a journalism training context, this goal could be similarly expressed as preparing journalists to produce safe, competent, quality journalism; safe, in this context, directly responds to a key principle of trauma-informed care and envisions both the safety of the source and the journalist (Office of Readiness and Response, 2020). Cantrell and Deloney (2007) argue simulation “allows the learner to build knowledge and experience through practice and rehearsal in a safe environment where, fortuitously, the inconvenience, discomfort, and potential harm to ‘real’ patients are minimized” (p. 377). Here again the notion of safety emerges, with an emphasis on the learner’s level of comfort. In a real-life situation in which a journalist was, for example, interviewing a grieving parent, the safety balance would necessarily tip toward the parent as they are the person most affected by the loss. However, in the context of simulation where a professional actor is portraying a grieving parent, the safety balance can tip toward the journalism student in hopes of ensuring their comfort with the exercise and, by extension, this type of interaction with a source.

Despite the evidence that classroom simulations of crises are beneficial in training and preparing news professionals for dilemmas they will face in the field (Veil, 2010), such training methods are not widely used. And yet, simulations allow students to engage in behaviour that approximates a realistic situation and to act and react to the situation as a journalist might, while at the same time permitting the instructor to observe, coach, and ultimately comment (Amend, Kay & Reilly, 2012). Based on the principles of experiential learning (Kolb & Kolb, 2005), simulations of traumatic events can not only permit students to
apply their theoretical knowledge, but also develop the necessary interaction skills, sometimes referred to as soft skills, that characterize trauma reporting (Amend, Kay & Reilly, 2012). Simulations create spaces for collective professional reflective practice, both reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action (Schon, 1983), which can positively contribute to journalists’ professional growth.

As Amend, Kay and Reilly (2012) note, simulations can bridge the gap between the theory of ethical trauma reporting and the complex realities journalists will face when working in circumstances that are often chaotic and unpredictable. They argue that, similar to the way physical science students learn scientific principles from laboratory experiments, simulations allow students to learn from first-hand experience in a safe and contained environment: “It is the environment that is simulated ... but the behaviour is real” (Jones, 1995, p. 7, qtd. in Amend, Kay & Reilly, 2012, p. 243).

Asal and Blake (2006) conceptualize simulation learning in three distinct parts: (1) preparation; (2) interaction; and (3) debriefing (p. 3). During the preparation phase, instructors provided the necessary conceptual material to students to help inform their behaviour during the simulation. This might include covering the historical evolution of journalistic practice regarding trauma reporting, discussing how to treat survivors with dignity and respect, and some principles regarding sensitive interviewing. Amend, Kay and Reilly (2012) note this is when students would be introduced to their roles. The interaction phase, as articulated by Amend, Kay and Reilly (2012), would be the actual simulation, in which students had the opportunity to put their knowledge into action and hone their reporting skills. The final phase, debriefing, would be a guided group discussion that drew out participants’ feelings, thoughts, and reactions, and allowed the instructor to highlight the lessons learned and take-aways (Amend, Kay & Reilly, 2012). Amend, Kay and Reilly (2012) argue certain establishing principles can help educators create effective simulations: (a) clearly defined teaching goals and learning outcomes that engage the entire group; (b) the depiction of an authentic trauma situation; (c) the utility and benefit of eliciting an emotional reaction of some sort; (d) the importance of post-simulation reflection; and (e) the inclusion of the simulation exercise at a point in the semester when students have developed some comfort with the material and still have ample time left afterward for reflection (pp. 244-245).

There are, of course, limits to the efficacy of simulations in a journalism school context. As Duncan and Newton (2010) point out, the classroom places certain limits on the extent to which students can be prepared for the “death knock,” which the authors define as a reporting task that occurs in the aftermath of a tragedy when reporters are sent to interview the relatives of the victim — a task, the authors note, that journalists are generally expected to learn by doing and that journalists in general regard as an unpleasant but necessary part of the job (p. 10).

Unlike the experiential learning opportunities an instructor can create for reporting on courts or city council, Duncan and Newton (2010) argue it is ethically and practically challenging to assign a death knock until students are working professionally (p. 14). Journalism instructors must therefore educate students about the death knock and its consequences in the absence of real-life experience. “To re-create the challenges of the death knock, and ape the industry’s aforementioned preference for ‘learning by doing,’” they write, “the tutor would have to subject the student to what could be extreme emotional stress, a position at odds with the institution’s duty of care to students” (p. 15). Further, they argue each student’s personal experience of death and bereavement would also have to be accounted for in order to prepare them adequately. In setting out to provide a “safe” environment for students, Duncan and Newton fear we may also be providing one that is “sterile and impotent in terms of the learning experience” (p. 15). Ultimately, Duncan and Newton conclude that having more knowledge about the positive outcomes of the death knock, having robust ideas about the ethics of the situation, and talking about and reflecting on the interview process in general, and intrusive interviewing specifically, within the classroom should improve the journalist’s confi-
evidence and feelings of self-efficacy and justification in approaching the task. “Arguably, if this was all we could do as educators, it would help make the death knock a more acceptable task, reducing the stress on the journalist involved” (Duncan & Newton, 2010, p. 15).

TEACHING HOSPITAL MODEL

A
erican journalist and media consultant Eric Newton defines the “teaching hospital model” of contemporary journalism education as a model of “learning by doing that includes college students, professors, and professionals working together under one ‘digital roof’ for the benefits of a community” (Newton, 2013). Among the various goals of such an enterprise are increasing the overall quality of journalism produced and the impact it has, as well as supporting innovation (Young & Giltrow, 2023). Simulation exercises relate and respond nicely to that particular strand of the teaching hospital model. As Newton argues: “Somewhere within the hospital, clinical trials should test new techniques and technologies, with results made widely known. The ultimate teaching hospital can be the engine of change for journalism education and for journalism” (Newton, 2013).

METHODOLOGY

Given the persuasive evidence supporting the use of clinical simulations in the classroom, I chose to include such an activity as an integral part of a new specialized reporting course on trauma-informed reporting offered for the first time in winter 2023.

The interview simulation exercise, as conceived, fit well within the course’s goal of building a greater understanding of trauma and its effect on survivors into journalistic practice. The course, offered to upper-year undergraduate and graduate students in their final semester, was intended to prepare students for the ethical, practical, and emotional challenges of reporting accurately and sensitively on traumatic events and individuals who have experienced trauma. Emerging journalists, whether they graduate into jobs in traditional newsrooms or work on their own as freelancers, are better served when they know how to report on people immersed in traumatic situations, as well as how to process the trauma they are exposed to and may be affected by in pursuit of or in response to their work.

Of the five learning objectives articulated in my syllabus, two specifically related to the interview simulation exercise: Developing hard and soft skills for ethically and sensitively reporting on trauma, including interviewing people and conducting research, and demonstrating a commitment to mental well-being, self-care, and agency by co-creating a supportive learning environment.

The interview simulation exercise was introduced during the first class. In Week 7, students were assigned a reading from Jo Healey’s (2020) book Trauma Reporting: A journalist’s guide to covering sensitive stories. In an effort to help students understand the perspective and potential vulnerability of interview subjects, the class was also joined by two guest speakers who had lived experience of interacting with journalists in the aftermath of a traumatic event. The interview simulation exercise occurred on Week 8, after which students had about two weeks to complete a written reflection on the exercise.

Four case-study scenarios that reflect the kind of reporting assignment an early-career journalist might receive in a newsroom, such as sudden death or critical injury, were developed. Students were asked to research the topic in advance and compose questions in preparation for an interview with a professional actor, who played the part of a survivor (and was compensated). The interviews, conducted over the video conferencing platform Zoom and ranging between 15 minutes and 40 minutes, were recorded. The recordings were shared with students afterward. Students were then asked to consolidate their learning by writing a critical reflection of the experience and participating in an informal debrief with the actors. The written reflections and debrief with the actors were not drawn upon for the purpose of this study.

The interview simulation exercise, designed to meet all of the Ontario Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development’s guiding principles for experiential learning activities (2017), supported the further development of employabil-
ity skills and ensured that for many students, their first encounter with a trauma survivor did not occur in the high-stakes environment of a working newsrooms, but rather the relative safety of a classroom environment that aimed to embody the philosophy that learning requires the space to fail productively.

The course was designed within a framework of trauma-informed principles (Office of Readiness and Response, 2020). These principles include safety; trustworthiness and transparency; peer support; collaboration and mutuality; empowerment, voice and choice; and cultural, historical and gender issues. In defining a trauma-informed approach to service delivery, the U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMSHA) describes cultural, historical, and gender issues as when an organization “actively moves past cultural stereotypes and biases (e.g., those based on race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, geography, etc.); offers gender responsive services; leverages the healing values of traditional cultural connections; and recognizes and addresses historical trauma” (The National Child Traumatic Stress Network, n.d.). McCue (2023) drills down even more precisely when quoting Lakota psychiatry professor Maria Brave Heart, who describes historical trauma as “a cumulative emotional and psychological wounding over the lifespan and across generations, emanating from a massive group trauma” (p. 76). Intergenerational trauma refers to the “idea that trauma from years ago can be transferred from generation to generation, and can continue to impact people today” (McCue 2023, p. 76), while race-based trauma is the “mental and emotional injury caused by encounters with racial bias and ethnic discrimination, racism, and hate” (McCue 2023, p. 76).

For the interview simulation exercise, students chose from four possible scenarios, meaning no one was forced to participate in a simulation that might mirror their own previous experiences or otherwise be upsetting or uncomfortable for them. At the same time, I acknowledge the four scenarios I chose to use in the simulation exercise all reflected incidents that could be described as acute – which refers to a psychological trauma that occurs in response to a single, highly-stressful event such as a car crash, natural disaster or the sudden death of a loved one – as opposed to chronic, which refers to ongoing or repeated traumatic experiences, such as emotional, physical, or sexual abuse, or domestic violence (Ertel, 2023).

The scenarios were as follows:

1. A young man in his early 30s has died overseas in a natural disaster; he was travelling for work when an earthquake struck, destroying his hotel. His husband has agreed to an interview.

Details: Vincent Cunningham, a 33-year-old engineer, was in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, to conduct an environmental assessment of the Canadian embassy, a task he has performed at embassies and other properties owned by the federal government around the world, when an earthquake struck on March 2. The earthquake levelled the hotel he was staying at. Foreign Affairs officials contacted the family Sunday, March 5 to confirm that Cunningham’s body had been pulled from the rubble. The interview with Cunningham’s partner, Anthony Bell, is scheduled for Tuesday, March 7.

2. A woman in her 50s has lost everything in a house fire, including two beloved cats. She has agreed to an interview.

Details: Marci Cohen, a 51-year-old woman, lives at 78 Peach Tree Lane in Ottawa. Her bungalow was destroyed by a house fire in which she lost everything, including two beloved cats. The fire was on Monday, March 6. The interview is scheduled for Wednesday, March 8.

3. Four people were killed and several others were seriously injured in a crash involving the city bus they were riding. A woman in her 30s, who lost both legs as a result of the crash, has agreed to an interview in the lead up to the first anniversary of the crash.
**Details:** Hélène St-Germain, 34, was riding home from work on the upper deck of a city bus when it crashed into a bus station shelter awning on March 16, 2022. Four people were killed in the crash and 23 were injured, including St-Germain, who lost both legs as a result of the crash and now uses a wheelchair. The interview is scheduled for Thursday, March 9, a week before the one-year anniversary of the crash.

4. **An avid cyclist in her mid-20s has died after being struck by a car. Her father has agreed to an interview.**

**Details:** Eleanor Barton, 26, and a friend were cycling together single file on County Road 17 near Wendover, Ont., on the evening of August 1, when they were struck from behind by a car at around 7:15 p.m. Barton, who was riding in the rear, sustained serious injuries and died the following day after being taken to The Ottawa Hospital’s Civic campus. The cause of the crash is still under investigation and the driver of the car has not been charged; police say alcohol and speed do not appear to be factors in. Her father, Gregory Barton, has agreed to an interview. The interview is scheduled for Wednesday, August 3.

A Zoom link was provided in advance to the actors and students. Once both arrived in the waiting room, I let them in and the interview began. At no point did I speak or turn on my camera. My role was to facilitate the calls and act as a silent witness in order to evaluate each students’ performance and be present should any technical difficulties arise. This process was outlined in advance to students to replicate a phone call or Zoom meeting between a journalist and a source.

Following the completion of the winter term, all students who participated in the interview simulation exercise were invited to participate in a research study (approved by Carleton University’s Research Ethics Board, Project #119386). Participation in the study involved one semi-structured interview conducted over Zoom, lasting between 20 and 35 minutes. Students who chose to participate were offered a $10 gift card to a coffee chain. Before the interview began, students were informed of the objectives and confidentiality of the study, as well as to how data would be stored. Of the 14 students registered in the course, four agreed to be interviewed, representing a 29 per cent participation rate.

Data collected from the interviews were transcribed using Otter, a voice-to-text transcription service that uses artificial intelligence. The transcripts were then checked against delivery to ensure the accuracy of any quotes selected for inclusion in this paper. I conducted a thematic analysis in line with aspects of Rubin and Rubin’s (2012) model for analyzing responsive interviews and informed by my own experience as a journalist. I looked for themes, areas of convergence and divergence among students’ responses, and paid particular attention to personal reflections about overcoming challenges during the exercise, as expressed in each student’s unique voice. As I discuss in my findings and analysis, this study highlights the benefits of using actors to create trauma scenarios for journalism students as well as reflections on how students might apply the skills acquired during the interview simulation exercise in a future work context. With four respondents, it is important to acknowledge that the study findings, while valuable, cannot be viewed as generalizable.

**FINDINGS & ANALYSIS**

Prior to taking a specialized reporting course on trauma-informed journalism – of which the interview simulation exercise was an integral component – the amount of training students enrolled in the course had received on trauma-informed approaches to interviews could, at best, be described as patchy. For some, guest speakers (including me) had spoken about the issue in a second-year reporting course. For others, instructors had offered one-to-one advice geared to supporting students working on specific trauma-intensive stories. Despite this lack of training, students had experience conducting trauma-intensive interviews as part of either classroom assignments or extra-curricular journalism work. For example, while in a previ-
ous reporting course, several had participated in They Were Loved, an obituary project created to commemorate the thousands of people in Canada who died of COVID-19. The initiative was a partnership between journalism schools across Canada and Maclean’s magazine, where the obituaries were ultimately published in print or online (Maclean’s, n.d.). Others had interviewed bereaved family members, survivors of sexual violence and people experiencing homelessness.

In terms of preparing for the interview simulation exercise, students undertook a variety of activities. Some referred to published guidance for interviewing someone recently bereaved, gathered relevant statistics and other background information that might be useful to help frame interview questions. They wrote out questions in advance, as well as what they wanted to say at the beginning of the conversation with the actor/source to establish and confirm the actor/source understood the interview process and the journalist’s role and responsibilities. This level of transparency is best practice, especially for interviews of a more sensitive nature. As Healey (2020) writes, “most people aren’t media savvy and don’t really understand what the journalist is doing. Trauma itself leaves people feeling disempowered, and so it is doubly important not to compound that and to explain the process” (p. 106).

Some students located news stories about events similar to their assigned simulation – whether it be a natural disaster that claimed many lives or a deadly cycling accident that left a devastated family in its wake – and paid close attention to powerful quotes and anecdotes in order to reverse-engineer questions that might elicit similar responses in their own interviews with the actor/source.

Having a clear understanding of the potential news value of the story was also important. As one student said during their semi-structured interview for this study: “The biggest and most important thing I did was look at the scenario and try to find a reason for talking to this person, even though it was a simulation ... I was struggling to find the news value, but eventually I decided the story would be used in this hypothetical situation to talk about bike safety and use it as a warning for others. And once I found the purpose, it helped me come up with the questions and definitely guided the questions that I would ask the father in this situation.”

There were many successful moments. One student asked the actor/source about fond memories of his deceased spouse and positively discovered how such a question allowed the source to open up and become more comfortable. Establishing this rapport, according to the student, made it easier to ask more uncomfortable questions at a later point in the interview.

Another student checked in with the actor/source about the support they’d received. The student later said this created an opportunity for the actor/source to “talk about how his community had showed up for him.”

Finally, a student reported feeling good about the way in which gentle reassurance they offered at a particular moment in the interview when the actor/source was self-critical about his parenting was received. According to the student: “I wanted to reassure him in that moment because he seemed self-conscious and he responded well to that. I think that brought us closer during the interview and broke down a wall that maybe he had up.”

While some sources may not welcome or value reassurance from a journalist, the student’s inclination to offer it reflected the kind of sensitivity one hopes journalists and those in training would bring to such interactions with sources.

Despite these and other successes, the interviews conducted as part of the simulation also had some challenging moments. Whether it was an awkwardly phrased question that didn’t land well or a highly specific logistical question that might have been better directed to a different source (such as first responders or government officials), there were occasions when students had to think on their feet and recover quickly in order to keep the conversation with the actor/source going. Reflecting on the experience afterward, students also said it was hard to know when to ask certain questions, to balance the need to probe for details and anecdotes with a desire not to push the source too hard, and to regain momentum if a source shuts down.

In one situation, a student said the actor/
source’s level of emotional distress at various points in the interview began to affect her emotionally. As she navigated this reaction in real time during the interview, she was also cognizant of the fact that the pain expressed by the actor/source and felt by her were prompted by a situation – in this case, the death of a spouse – that didn’t actually occur, and this realization momentarily brought the student out of the suspended disbelief required to engage in the simulation.

Another student reported a similar moment of being pulled out of character during the simulation when she asked the actor/source who was grieving the death of his 26-year-old daughter about his favourite memories of her. Despite how convincing the actor/source had been throughout the simulation, he wasn’t able to answer the question. As the student said afterward, “That just took me out of the situation for a minute and I was a little bit panicked about asking the next question, but I recovered quickly ... In real life, I still think that’s a good question to ask.”

Both situations highlighted the limits of this particular interview simulation exercise as it was conceived and executed. The actor/sources were not provided scripts or significant back stories, but rather encouraged to improvise answers to the questions posed by students. In this case, the deceased daughter did not exist so the actor/source did not have a well of memories to draw from. However, that should not take away from the potential power of such a question and the journalist’s invitation to a grieving person to share so openly.

Among the important takeaways and lessons students highlighted were increased confidence in themselves and their respective abilities to successfully conduct sensitive interviews. One student said: “When I wasn’t super confident, the interviewee wasn’t super confident and he got more nervous. And I don’t want to make anyone nervous, especially in an interview that’s trauma heavy.”

One student noted the importance of transparency and making it known to the source “they have control of their story, and not the other way around.”

Yet another student said the biggest takeaway was the importance of journalists having a clear idea of the story they are pursuing before they conduct sensitive interviews with sources. “The most important part of this exercise was to know not to exploit people for the purpose of just having a good story ... there should be a reason and some benefit to the community to the person doing the interview.”

Finally, for another student, just participating in the exercise on the whole presented an opportunity to experience something they hadn’t yet done in journalism school. When a similar situation presents itself in a future professional setting, the student said they will know what to expect in terms of managing their emotional reaction during and after the interview.

Speaking of future work and the ways in which lessons learned during the interview simulation exercise might apply, common themes that emerged from the exercise were boosted confidence, the importance of transparency, informed consent, and outlining the process at the outset of the interview, doing research in advance, and having a self-care plan in place for after the interview, when the emotional weight of the assignment might settle in the mind of the journalist.

Two students commented on the value of the activity. “I feel like it’s very valuable to go through this because you might see this yourself in the real world and you’ll have those tools already because you worked on it throughout this course,” said one student.

Added another student whose previous reporting assignments have included stories about sexual assault, chronic pain, and other health issues: “I want to keep telling those kinds of stories and that definitely will include speaking to people that have experienced difficult moments and traumatic experiences, so having this course and the tools in my back pocket reassures me that I can do the job.”

Speaking more broadly to the value of such simulation exercises as part of the journalism education, students said it was helpful to get hands-on practice in a low-stakes environment. Learning by doing and then reflecting on the experience has considerable value, as does learning to manage one’s emotions, especially anxiety, in advance of trauma-intensive interviews.

“The value is that it lets students become more comfortable with this kind of interview so that
when they do eventually start doing these, they are familiar with the best practices, they know what to expect, they know what their preferred way of handling it is, which means that it’s likely to go a little bit smoother than if they hadn’t done that,” one student said.

Added another: “So much of journalism school is just go out and do it, and I think that works to an extent. But when you have real victims and these traumatic situations, it’s not really OK for the victims of these situations to just be thrown by some student who doesn’t know what they’re doing. And this is such an excellent way to teach somebody how to do it. And if they make a mistake, this is an OK place to do it.”

In general, the students interviewed about their participation in the simulation exercise spoke positively about the experience. However, they also offered suggestions to improve future simulations, such as providing participants with a greater amount of detail and backstory for each scenario, suggesting a wider window of interview length (20 to 40 minutes, rather than 30 to 45 minutes) and providing greater clarity on what students should be looking to get out of the interview.

Students were not required to produce a piece of journalism following their interview with an actor/source. The assignment was the interview itself. However, not having to fully think through what they might need to gather in order to produce a story meant some students did not collect the kinds of details or anecdotes they would have needed in order to produce a well-rounded and thorough piece of journalism. In future, this shortcoming could be addressed by advising students in advance that they will be required to submit a story outline that would include a lead, five compelling quotes, and five key details gleaned from the interview that could be incorporated into a piece of digital news journalism. Doing such would constructively build on the interview simulation exercise and underscore the dual importance of conducting sensitive interviews and gathering sufficient material to produce a well-rounded and thorough piece of journalism. One student suggested a future exercise should include a scenario that involves sexual assault.

COVID-19 AS A CATALYST FOR PEDAGOGICAL CHANGE

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020 forced college and university instructors to shift from in-person to online learning practically overnight, often with the support of a range of digital platforms and video-conferencing tools (Capital Current, 2020). What soon became clear to many educators and students alike was that this new type of learning – and the changes it imposed upon long-established pedagogies – had some upsides. Not having to travel to campus saved everyone time, not to mention transportation, food, and even childcare costs (Rosales, 2021). Meanwhile, being able to log on from anywhere with a stable internet connection increased flexibility and convenience, not to mention accessibility (Rosales, 2021; Assif, Nikkila & Sue-Chee, 2022).

Even after many post-secondary institutions returned to hybrid or fully in-person classes in the fall of 2021 – after spending the entire 2020-2021 academic year online – the use of video conferencing tools persisted as a way of not only including students who couldn’t come to class, often because they were isolating due to illness, but also attracting guest speakers who weren’t in the same city, or even the same country (Smith, 2022).

This shift to teaching online during the pandemic and, in particular, the broad adoption and use of video conferencing tools facilitated the use of such technology for the interview simulation exercise outlined here. Interviewing actor/sources via Zoom ensured students could participate from a location of their choosing and helped them manage the emotional labour of conducting such a challenging and potentially emotional interview in person. Similarly, the use of Zoom made the exercise accessible for working actors who also weren’t required to leave the comfort of their homes in order to contribute to the exercise. Finally, Zoom was an easy, efficient, and cost-effective way of recording and sharing the interviews with students. Thus, the normative use of video conferencing tools during the pandemic created the conditions to go beyond the bricks and mortar classroom, facilitating new possibilities for preparing students to conduct sensitive interviews. Future simulation exercises may
similarly benefit from being delivered with the use of such technology.

CONCLUSION

This article articulated how an interview simulation exercise was used in a journalism training context by locating such an activity within both the broader use of simulations in classroom settings and, specifically, instruction on trauma-informed approaches to reporting that aim to cause no further harm to the survivor of traumatic experience, nor the journalist tasked with reporting on them. Though such practices have existed in some measure dating back to the 1990s, the use of interview simulation exercises remains rare in Canadian journalism school classrooms. It may be worth reconsidering this.

There is considerable pedagogical value in creating a low-stakes environment in which students can practice a skill, particularly one as challenging to master as navigating a trauma-intensive interview, without the added pressure of managing the emotions of a bereaved source. For instructors, being able to listen in on a student’s interview with an actor/source brings the added benefit of providing meaningful feedback to the student on everything from body language and tone to the specific questions they ask and their efforts to build rapport with the actor/source. In my experience, most journalism instructors talk about effective interview skills at some point during a course. And we see in a student’s completed editorial work the end result of interviews in the form of attributed quotes, anecdotes, and details. But rarely do we get to see – and provide feedback on – the crucial middle step. Meanwhile, an upside to the widespread adoption of video conferencing tools during the COVID-19 pandemic is the creation of an easy and accessible path for conducting and recording interviews.

The successful integration of an interview simulation exercise in a specialized reporting course on trauma-informed journalism opens the mind to other possibilities. Future simulation exercises, for example, could be deployed to facilitate skill building in entry-level reporting courses in an effort to develop interviewing competencies. Here, again, we might see how this low-stakes challenge could create an opportunity for high-impact feedback that ultimately supports students in harnessing the skills they need to be effective journalists.

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NOTES

1 The author is a voluntary forum member and has worked on several projects in partnership with the forum, including Taking Care: A report on mental health, well-being and trauma among Canadian media workers (2022).


3 Drake (2008) cautions, however, that the instructor should be mindful that simulation can be psychologically powerful and therefore avoid elements that are emotionally manipulative or beyond the age and development stage of the students (para. 13).
APPENDIX A – INTERVIEW GUIDE

Simulated solutions: Using a clinical simulation exercise to prepare journalism students for trauma-intensive interviews

1. Prior to the interview simulation exercise in JOUR 4101: Trauma-Informed Reporting, how much training have you received on trauma-informed approaches to interviews?

2. Prior to the interview simulation exercise in JOUR 4101, have you conducted a trauma-intensive interview? Describe the experience.

3. How did you prepare for participating in the interview simulation exercise in JOUR 4101?

4. Describe a successful moment or question from the interview. What made it successful?

5. Describe a challenging moment from the interview. What made it challenging? How did you handle it?

6. What is the most important thing you learned and why?

7. How will you apply what you’ve learned during the interview simulation exercise to real-life interviews?

8. What is the value of an interview simulation exercise as part of journalism education and training?

9. What thoughts or suggestions do you have for future interview simulation exercises?

10. Following the interview simulation exercise in JOUR 4101, what did you do for self-care?

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